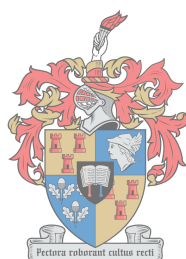


Experimental Explorations of Selected Women's Innovative Poetry Written in English, with a focus on 'the Gurlisque'

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Declaration

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Abstract

This dissertation explores innovative poetry by selected contemporary English-language women writers. In particular, it deliberates how this poetry works between poetic traditions of lyric expressivity and forms of experimentalism. The dissertation comprises both a creative and a critical component: my debut collection *Thungachi* (see Addendum i), written as part of the doctorate, has already been published by the South African poetry press, uHlanga, in 2017. The scholarly component of the dissertation begins with a section which riffs on the poet Eileen Myles's term "affidamento". Searching for examples of local innovative female poetry, and unable to find an obvious local figure of female inspiration and guidance, where does a young South African 'Indian' female poet turn when she is writing between the uneasy claims of gendered identity and linguistic-conceptual experimentalism? This section of the study discusses (with different degrees of depth and intensity) my evolving poetic ideas and methods in relation to work by Meena Alexander, Eileen Myles, and Harryette Mullen, three female poets who have enabled me to frame self-reflexive thinking about my poetics. I suggest that their poetry has assisted me in exploring the various possibilities that arise when lyric expressivism is placed under the pressures of raced bodies, queerness and linguistic-conceptual experimentalism. In drawing attention to experimental women's poetry as a marginal form, I propose the concept of 'non-place' as a useful provisional term, able to situate and yet repeatedly to re-locate the writing of female experimental poets in their prolific and varied exploration of boundaries such as language and lyric. Here, I also draw on Rosi Braidotti's "nomadic consciousness" as a useful conceptual node. Central to the dissertation is an extended engagement with an emergent Gurlesque, a poetics first theorised by the North American experimental female poets Arielle Greenberg and Lara Glenum. This section of the study explores some of the theoretical frameworks that Greenberg and Glenum have found useful in thinking through the poetics which they collected in *Gurlesque: the New Grrly, Grotesque, Burlesque Poetics*. Among these are critical girlhood studies, Riot Grrrl, camp and a female grotesque, all of which offer enlightening optics in respect of young female poets "Gurlesque tendencies". I speculate about the possibilities of a Gurlesque poetics, considering whether more marginalised femalenesses may also find some kind of conceptual home in the term. Here, I use Ailbhe Darcy's concept of "alternate sets of cultural referents" (2015: 3) to explore the feasibility of a more inclusive Gurlesque poetics that could be transnational, queer and raced. Overall, using examples of contemporary experimental poetry by a range of women writers, I demonstrate that women's so-called experimental

poetry cannot be restricted to received notions of Language poetry, or an avant-garde, or to refutations of a ‘confessional impulse’ in favour of disembodied abstraction. Instead, the young women poets whose work I engage illustrate the complex inflections of female, feminine, feminist, subversively drawing on a disparate range of processes, styles and indeed subjects to answer the call of what Kathleen Fraser terms “the innovative necessity” (2000).

Opsomming

Hierdie dissertasie ondersoek innoverende digkuns spesifiek deur kontemporêre Engelstalige vroue skrywers. Dit oorweeg, in besonderhede, hoe hierdie digkuns werk in verskillende digkuns tradisies, van liriek-beskrywende en vorms van eksperimentelisme. Die dissertasie behels beide 'n kreatiewe en kritieke komponent: die outeur se debuutdigbundel, genaamd *Thangachi* (sien Addendum i), wat geskryf is as deel van die doktoraat, is reeds gepubliseer deur die Suid Afrikaanse digkunsdrukker, uHlanga, in 2017. Die akademiese komponent van die dissertasie begin met 'n afdeling wat fokus op die digter Eileen Myles se term “affidamento”. In die soeke na plaaslike voorbeelde van innoverende vroulike digkuns, en die gebrek aan sulke prominente voorbeelde as inspirasie en leiding, waarna moet 'n jong Suid Afrikaanse vroulike digter draai as sy skryf binne die onstuimige milieu van geslagsidentiteit en taalkundig-konsepsuele eksperimentelisme? Die eerste gedeelte van die studie, bespreek (met varierende grade van diepte en intensiteit) my ontwikkelende poëtiese idees en metodes in verhouding met werk deur Meena Alexander, Eileen Myles en Harryette Mullen, drie vroulike digters wat my in staat gestel het om selfondersoekende denke in my digkuns toe te pas. In die dissertasie stel ek voor dat hul digkuns my gehelp het om die verskillende moontlikhede wat mag vorendag kom wanneer liriese ekspressiewisme/uitdrukking onder die druk van rasse-liggame, queerheid en taalkundig-konsepsuele eksperimentelisme te ondersoek. Deur aandag te vestig op eksperimentele vroue se digkuns as 'n marginale vorm, stel ek die konsep van ‘nie-plek’ (non-place) voor, as 'n behulp same voorlopige term, wat dit moontlik maak om die werke van vroulike eksperimentele digters te plaas, maar ook herhalend hierdie plasing aan te pas binne hul produktiewe en gevarieerde verkenning van grense soos taal en lirieke. Hier maak ek ook gebruik van Rosi Braidotti se nomadiese bewustheid (“nomadic consciousness”) as 'n behulp same konseptuele node vir 'n jong Suid Afrikaanse “Indiese” vroulike digter. Wat sentraal staan in hierdie dissertasie is 'n uitgebreide skakeling met 'n opkomende “Gurlesque”, 'n digvorm wat eers deur die Noord-Amerikaanse eksperimentele vroulike digters, Arielle Greenberg en Lara Glenum geteoretiseer is. Die tweede gedeelte van die studie verken die teoretiese raamwerke wat Greenberg en Glenum handig gevind het om om nadenkend te werk te gaan met gedigte wat hulle in die bundel *Gurlesque: the New Grrly, Grotesque, Burlesque Poetics* saam gegroepeer het in. Tussen hierdie gedigte is daar kritiese meisieskap- (“girlhood”) studies, *Riot Grrrl*, “camp” en 'n vroulike groteske, wat alles 'n verliggende perspektief bied van jong vroulike digters se “Gurlesque tendencies”. Ek spekuleer oor die moontlikhede van 'n Gurlesque poëtika buite

die konteks van 'n "Wit Amerika", met oorweging of meer gemarginaliseerde vroulikhede ook een of ander vorm van konseptuele tuiste kan vind in die term. Hier gebruik ek Ailbhe Darcy se konsep van alternatiewe stelle van kulturele referente ("alternate sets of cultural referents") om die lewensvatbaarheid van 'n meer inklusiewe Gurlésque poëtika wat transnasionale, queer en rasse grense oorskry, te ondersoek. In geheel, deur sulke voorbeelde van kontemporêre eksperimentele poësie van 'n verskeidenheid vroulike skrywers te gebruik, demonstreer ek dat vroue se sogenaamde eksperimentele digkuns nie beperk kan word tot ontvangde idees van "Language poetry", of avant-garde, of tot weerlegging van 'n belydende impuls ("confessional impulse") in ruil vir 'n liggaamlose abstraksie nie. Intendeel, illustreer die jong vroulike digters wie se werk ek betrek het, die komplekse verbugings van vrou, vroulike en feminis, omverwerpend gebaseer op 'n uiteenlopende reeks prosesse, style en inderdaad onderwerpe om die roep van Kathleen Fraser wat sy die "the innovative necessity" (2000) noem, te antwoord.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In this dissertation I explore examples of so-called experimental poetry by selected contemporary English-language women writers, considering in particular how this poetry works between poetic traditions of lyric expressivity and forms of the experimental that are often considered to have developed from Language poetry.ⁱ The dissertation comprises both a creative and a critical component. My debut collection *Thungachi*, written as part of the doctorate, was published by the South African experimental poetry press, uHlanga, in 2017. This collection is provided in a separate chapter (Chapter Five). In the more conventional research component of the dissertation, via the poetry of Meena Alexander, Eileen Myles, and Harryette Mullen, in Chapter Two I explore my developing understanding of my own poetry as both lyrical and experimental. Then, in Chapter Three, I turn to the emergence in the 2000s of a youthful Gurlisque poetics, tracing something of its lineage, and workings.

The experimentalism of the poetry I discuss is stylistically “diverse...and individuals differ as to their commitment to feminism” (Tarlo 1999:95), yet across different subject matters and allegiances the poetry shares “a provisionality, a refusal to resolve into a single position or insight”. This is largely because the poets are inclined to treat self, subject, language, indeed the poem space itself, as sites of “exploration and experimentation” (Tarlo 1999:95). Inspirational to my study is Rachel Galvin’s work on “poetic circuit and comparative approaches, tracing dialogues and conceptual affinities across...boundaries” (2014:1). She makes a case for the scholarly theorising of unusual relation among poets not generally considered related, in order to enable new understandings of the mobile parameters of “experimental poetics” (2014:1).

The “very naming” of a poetic ‘experimental’ “cannot actually occur in the singular; the categories need to be mobile and uncertain, in order to account for the nuanced varieties of unusual poetries produced by different writers. In their discussions of contemporary poetry that problematise established expressive, lyric traditions, scholars have of necessity used uneven descriptors such as “post-language”, “‘avant-garde’, ‘experimental’, ‘innovative’, ‘postmodern’” (Tarlo 1999:95) and “post-avantism” (Roberson 2013: 155), searching for frames of reference and practice which are sufficiently flexible to accommodate the diversities of unusual women’s poetries from many different contexts. The United States and Canada have been especially prominent locales for the development of the broad field of experimental poetry, along with more erratic, perhaps fragile manifestations in the United

Kingdom. In addition, these marginal poetic scenes have often proven problematic for female poets, who have found themselves on the margins of the margins, simply because they are women, and have not been considered to publish the conceptually robust, intellectually tough innovative poetry favoured among a male coterie. At the risk of caricature, for example: ‘supposedly’ experimental women poets were taken to task by their male poet peers and by male critics for addressing in their work ‘old-fashioned’ *and* ‘unseemly’ questions of ‘the body’, the embodied female subject, when ‘surely’ experimental poetics Proper were committed to shedding such worn conventions? Looked at from a different perspective, we see the troubled relations between poetic innovation and feminism. For example, Marjorie Perloff (1990) remarks the space of refusal assigned by mainstream feminism to experimental women’s poetry. Feminist “women’s poetry defines itself ideologically, scrupulously including writing of differing cultural and ideological concerns, but excluding writers whose predominant concerns are with poetic form” (Tarlo 1999:96).

As my own challenges as a young female experimental poet searching for an artistic-conceptual community in South Africa will show, instances of unusual poetries can emerge in a range of contexts, and in odd conjuncture. My purpose is not to insist on narrow national contexts, especially given the Internet-mediated online communities in which some of this experimental female poetry initially finds connection and audience. Despite their specific geographical locations, and the publication of familiar bound-text collections, writing by experimental women poets also circulates in virtual networks of poetic activity, on blogs, homepages, discussion threads, poetry sites and e-journals. Thus my dissertation “gesture[s] towards a political, aesthetic and imaginative community that is not premised” on experimentalism categorised as a school of aesthetic “sameness”; it gives space to the possibilities of experimentalism in poetry as a series of “debates [which] have the discoveries, frustrations, excitement and anger that come with all...difficult conversations worth having” (Higgs 2013:np). That said, in Chapter Three of the study, I do test the shapes of an emergent Gurlisque poetics (see below), given the influence that this concept has held for me as a young contemporary female poet seeking to find creative connection.

The dissertation deliberately adopts, variously across different sections, a form and approach which blur scholarly argument and creative practice. As Brenda Cooper remarks, such research designs are associated with perils, but also with possibilities. They draw on a range of “alternative practices” (2014:245) which “subvert the dominant” academic method and register and thus have the potential to create new, transformative kinds of disciplinary knowledge. My method entails both scholarly and personal voice, critical and creative

angles. Appropriately, as a young poet exploring the diversity which characterises unusual contemporary poetry by selected female poets writing in English, my very method in the dissertation will “emphasise the plural instead of the one, narrow path”; it will play “with the concept of hybridity, which is capacious” (Cooper 2014: 247).

Innovative poetry is an under-researched area in South Africa (Murray 2011, Pieterse 2012), perhaps because the experimental impulse in local poetry has been constrained by more urgent social-expressivist agendas, leading to scarce work of this kind. However, much also depends on the way in which ‘innovation’ is envisaged. It is notable that in South Africa a small, yet significant space *has* over the last twenty years been carved for conceptual-experimental prose by writers such as Ivan Vladislavić. Yet in comparison with experimental poetry, the *prose* genre, whether fiction or creative non-fiction, has the formal advantage of ‘story-telling’ via elements such as setting, character, narrative drive, and what readers can assume to be a less mediated relation to familiar lived socialities. Even when a prose writer is artfully working in order to reveal language as a medium of making rather than merely of communicating a ‘message’, prose can give the illusion of seeming easier, or more direct, than poetry. Even before a poet turns experimental, s/he is working in a generic language that is already freighted with the difficulties of the oblique, the metaphoric, the conceptual. It is thus not surprising that little attention has been given to finding and engaging with submerged experimental poetics in South Africa, the experimental being a tangential, convoluted assemblage of forms in a country where speaking out and voicing and the recovery of repressed histories has been so crucial. Here, despite some work by Rita Barnard, South African black poetics have also tended to be recuperated in terms of ‘social realism’, rather than along vectors of linguistic-conceptual experimentalism. Annel Pieterse, for her part, does excellent work on language intersections of performance and print poetry in South Africa. Sally-Ann Murray, too, addresses the difficulties she faced as a poet and a scholar in trying to imagine what ‘experimental’ might mean, for a female South African poet, gradually coming to the understanding that complex intersections of lyric impulse and linguistic experimentalism could reasonably be expected, especially for the female poet. The point, clearly, is for me as a researcher to be open to opening up definitions. I must allow even that the apparently clear label ‘experimental’ does not denote one part of an oppositional binary, set against ‘traditional’, ‘mainstream’, or ‘conventional’. Instead, my very thinking will have to be flexible, able to grapple with blurring, and conceptual mobility.

Although it is only as recently as 2013 that David and Christine Kennedy published *Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970-2010: Body, Time and Locale*, there are

increasingly influential bodies of scholarship on women's experimental poetics in the US, Canada, the UK, and Europe. (See, for example, Bergvall [2001], DuPlessis [1990], Fraser [2000], Huk [1997], Keller [1999, 2010], Kinnahan [1996, 2009], Wills [1994].) Despite this growth in scholarship, however, women's innovative poetry continues to be considered marginal to more well-known traditions of women's poetry, such as confessional poetry and the counter-politics of feminist conscientising. I contend that 'innovative' needs to be widely conceptualised. For poets from marginalised groups – various alignments of female writers, or black writers, for example, it might well be highly innovative to write poems which address subject matters that have been considered marginal, or unimportant, or taboo, and to do so using the convention of poetic voice *unconventionally* so as to trouble expectations about the breaking down *or* building up of coherent subjectivity. This too, could be considered experimental, albeit not necessarily in respect of unusual form and style. Here, the link between content and form is in itself a poetic innovation, a poetic discourse of which 'language' is a part. Such a straddling of form and content as 'experimental' is evident in my own debut poetry collection *Thungachi*.

In Chapter Two, "Stumbling on the 'Affidamento'", I begin to map something of my own development as a young, recently-published poet. My aim in this part of the research is to investigate the inclinations towards linguistic play, taboo subject matters, identity politics, cultural affiliation, and gender – a mix that is not usually considered easily reconciled. I wish to locate my own poetry in relation to female authority figures, or 'affidamento', searching for women poets who might, through their own poetry and achievements, authorise my own provisional attempts to write an unusual, culturally marginal, culturally diverse, form of poetry. Here, I am working to understand at least some of the influences that pattern my poetry. This entails a re-viewing of female traditions which speak to the difficult validities and compromises of the poetry I have been writing and publishing: a curious mix of inventive family history, verbal-visual experiment, and sexually transgressive representations, in language and page presentation, of femaleness.

I consider my initial thinking through the experience of writing as a South African Indian female poet by working with Meena Alexander's *Illiterate Heart* (2002), a volume which, in the relative absence of poetry by Indian South African women (or by women poets from South Africa but of Indian descent?) offered me access to debates about how a female poet might represent a rhizomatic form of 'Indian' identity, dis-orientating orientalist essentialisms by placing selves in places where language calls 'self' into question. Working with Alexander's diasporic poetry, a task I began in my MA, welcoming the possibilities for

thinking about what it meant to write as a member identified as part of a group ('Indian', 'female', 'poet'...) but then also chafing against Alexander's apparent reluctance to push this element further towards stylistic innovation, has prompted me to turn my own initial interest in poetry, identity politics and femaleness in more complicated directions. Here, I briefly reflect on some further female poetic 'affidamento' figures (Eileen Myles and Harryette Mullen), leading in to the next section, where I situate the Gurlesque as an especially intriguing frame for reference for a young female poet.

In Chapter Three, "the Gurlesque", the main, extended section of the dissertation, I turn to a detailed engagement with the emergence of a Gurlesque poetics. The young (originally North American) female poets collected in the anthology, *Gurlesque: the new grrly, grotesque, burlesque poetics*, use camp, "girly kitsch," and the female grotesque (Glenum 2010:1) in order to "assault [...] the norms of acceptable female behavior by irreverently deploying gender stereotypes to subversive ends" (Glenum 2010:1). They write about contemporary femaleness under the sign of the commoditised body; they address "technologized subjectivity" (Rowe nd) and reconfigurations of lyric expressivity and self coherence, and place a sentimentally feminine cuteness in uneasy relation to controversial subjects such as pornography. They treat femalenesses as "constructions...permeable and temporary", associated with "the potential for...containment as *well* as the impossibility of ...limits" (Rowe nd). For Gurlesque poets, no subject, thought or flux should be ignored as irrelevant to the poetries of femaleness. Everything is to be written on; nothing is to be written off. Poets such as Patricia Lockwood and Ariana Reines borrow at will from popular culture and feminist theory, re-aligning the demotic and the intellectual in provocative ways that refuse to permit a reader to designate comforting categorical distinctions between femininity and feminism, or self and politics.

A Gurlesque, while not directly part of the conceptual-linguistic innovation associated with so-called Language poetry, *does* represent a line of experimentalism in women's contemporary innovative poetries, blurring expressive lyric intensity and found materials, personal self both debunked and asserted as a form of female agency that can valuably overstep boundaries of gender and genre alike. Like those experimentalisms which comprise more obviously avant-garde poetics of Language writing, a Gurlesque is similarly "intersectional; it exists at the boundary of multiple determinants, of which the turn to language, the critique of the subject, and its social formation are central" (Watten 2016:5). The difference, though, is that Gurlesque poetics place questions of femaleness, femininity and feminism at the heart of poetic practice. Gurlesque draws on multiple influences in the

formation of its poetics, hybrid forms. My particular interest, in Chapter Three, is to chart *some* of the key historical influences through which scholars can begin to think through the formation of a nascent Gurlisque poetics. Among these are: critical girlhood studies, Riot Grrrl, camp and a female grotesque. Here, I substantially develop the ideas of Glenum and Greenberg, in their original editorial comments to the Gurlisque anthology.

Barrett Watten (2016) points out the mistake of thinking of experimental contemporary poetics via a clear lineage of inheritance and succession – his example is conceptual writing’s supposed superseding of Language writing in an ascendant, replacement series of poetic avant-gardes. Instead, he argues that the innovative poetics that emerged in the 2000s (especially in the United States, but also erratically across the world), owe differential debts to earlier Language writing. “Each develops new relationships between poetic form and social formation, poetics and practice, that would have been different or impossible” without the “critical alterity” of early Language writing, with its forceful break from long traditions of expressive ‘authenticity’, empirical selfhood and confessional, creating a visibly disjunctive gap between word and thing, word and meaning, “developing new forms of writing out of...cultural logics” (7). He mentions a number of nascent poetics which frame “language...as an insufficiency” (44) rather than as a medium capable of coherently expressing the truth of the real. In his broad list – poetics which sometimes intersect, and are sometimes in contention – are “Conceptual writing, Flarf, ecopoetics, Gurlisque, hybrid writing, recent poets theatre, disability and multilingual poetics, the New Lyric, Occupy poetry and writing by a number of poets of colour” (7). In all these poetics, instead of the author “hanging on to...autobiographical photographs”; holding tight to “old humanistic storytelling” (Ginsberg 1970: 39), the poets deliberately reflect (as did Allen Ginsberg himself in “Poetry XX Century”) on the inadequacy of language as representation and expression of consciousness, recognising a contemporary cultural zeitgeist in which art is “devolving into examination-experiment on the very material of which it is made” (Ginsberg 1970:39).

In such a complex landscape, the work of female practitioners of unusual poetry is difficult to name and to categorise. As I have been suggesting, even the term ‘experimental’ is not completely accurate, since it may sometimes refer to an inventive stylistics, while at other times the question of innovation or unusualness may have more to do with content and voice. (Annel Pieterse [2012], for example, in the context of debates about the lyric and South African spoken word poetics, addresses the limitations of defining the linguistically experimental according to normative precepts of American Language poetry. This is an

important lesson for responding to poetries that may seek to experiment in ways *beyond* those habitually designated ‘truly’ experimental by the most visible, Western practitioners. Again, this is even more valid if we recall that an avant-garde has been a male-dominated scene in the States, many insiders skeptical of experimentalism by female American poets.)

For my own dissertation, I recognise that women’s unusual poetry is an elusive even nomadic category that has been treated as tangential to Language Writing, *and* more mainstream feminist expressive poetics (see Rowe nd). In this spirit, I consider my own development as a young poet who, while holding to some forms of identity *also* inclines towards innovative writing. As Redell Olsen explains, contemporary women writers of innovative poetry have “a complicated relationship of rejection and assimilation towards the lyric”; the ‘I’ is conditional, “involved in explorations of...limits and possibilities” performed through experimentalism (2008: 380). The process of thinking through ‘experimentalisms’ helps me to imagine that innovative female poets might turn the place of their marginality into productive spaces of the in-between. In this in-between space, I explore how encounters amongst otherwise binarised ideas and modes, or even between traditional and taboo subjects, could be addressed, even reinvented. (Such issues are developed in Chapter Three, specifically as concerns the Gurlisque.) Making space for this type of ambiguous, unresolved recuperation is important, since as Michael Roberson argues in his dissertation on *Post-Language* poetries, there have arisen numbers of innovative poets for whom uncertain forms of engagement, cultural positioning and affiliation are significantly intersectional, entailing a “provisionality” which encompasses “both the poetics and the ethics” of poetic response – not an either/or - “grounding the abstract politics” of an ‘avant garde’ “in actual political stakes, like gender, race, and class” (Roberson 2013: ii).

It could be said that female experimental poets, in whatever country, occupy a “non-place” in what is already a minor poetry movement (Broqua 1998). Extrapolating from Broqua (who refers to such poets in Britain), I propose this aporetic “non-place” not as a negative, but as a productive, relational field of criss-crossing conversations, influences and imaginative territories. The “non-place” then potentially *overcomes* the defining lack which supposedly typifies female experimental poets (too few, too marginal, too elite, too difficult...). The ‘non-place’ forms a generative means of conceptualising the spaces of *excess* out of which contemporary experimental female poets may work. This is applicable to Gurlisque poetries, for example, in that Gurlisque is a *tendency*, the provisionality undermining the narrowness of ‘schools’ of poetry, and also allowing for the Internet-mediated transnational fields of influence beyond national borders. Overall, it will become

clear in this study that a women's experimental poetry does not follow any neat border or enclosed categorical form, but uses a range of processes, styles and indeed subjects to address what Kathleen Fraser has called the "innovative necessity" (2000). I am interested in investigating the different expressions which "innovative necessity" might take. It is likely that when women produce what have been considered 'unusual poetics', as Clair Wills (1994) notes, they tend neither to dismiss lyric voicing *nor* simply to adopt the conceptual-stylistic difficulties associated with Language poetry. Rather, without pushing for reconciliation, these poets consciously work in-between modes, unsettling, testing the possibilities which poetry offers for the forming, de-forming, re-forming, and performing, in language, of received notions such as 'femaleness', 'self', 'dominant' and 'subordinate'. Experimental female poets have been labelled elitist, obscure, and unnecessarily difficult. It has been said that they don't 'relate' to 'real' women's experience, and are thus irrelevant. Following Wills (1994), however, and using as my case study an emergent Gurlisque, I suggest that unusual forms of contemporary female poetics can offer vital (and intriguing) routes into debates about feminism, commodity culture, and gendered identities. Tarlo points out that this writing *is* politically engaged; it is often underwritten by forms of feminist poststructuralism and therefore, rather than glibly by-passing the political, it embodies in its obliqueness and elusiveness "a complex engagement with issues of language, subjectivity and gender" (1999:94). This difficult legibility works to reveal the assumed norms of language. Further, as Jessica Lewis Luck observes in her analysis of poetry by the category-bending black North American poet Harryette Mullen, contemporary female poets who experiment with language tend to *adapt* the abstractions of early Language writing, finding powerful new forms of intersection between the linguistic, the conceptual, lyric expressivity and female embodiment (see Spahr 2003). The *productive* paradox is that women experimental poets may choose to "pit the impossibility of identity against the necessity of identity" (Keller, Jim 2009: 108); I am interested in exploring the shapes which such a bind may take.

Chapter Two: Stumbling on the “Affidamento”

Where can I ‘locate’ myself as a young female poet in South Africa, a poet who also happens to be of ‘Indian’ extraction? I have had to start somewhere. Which identifiers called to me, and which were deflected? What (*how?*) was I (to be) called? Was there some ‘hierarchy’ of identity affiliation? Who would determine this? Who (after all) was ‘I’?

questions swirl, curl
they go and come
go nowhere come
somewhere I hoped

Like Sylvia Plath (schoolgirls’ heroine; adolescent crush; idol of confessional poetry), “I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am” (1963: np). Like Plath, I believed my brag was different, even though I felt that any ‘identity’ could never simply be whole; was never something given in a flood of confidently straight motion which proceeds directly from ‘I am’ to ‘I am’. There are the separating commas. Speaking the words aloud – or even silently – there is the likelihood of different stresses and emphases. And yet pulsing through it all is metaphor of a heart’s rhythmical beat. Not the iamb of the famous poetic pentameter, to be sure, but still: I am, I am, I am.

In my own slow pace to write
can I be ‘I’?

In the race ‘they’ have reserved
for me, ‘I’ am ‘Indian’

not to mention
the unmentionable woman

Is it possible for ‘Indian’
to become the race I am?

And for female
to engender
without endanger
ring

In my own race

(quote) “Indian” (quite)
 I have been
 – *I/am* – divided
 into several categories
 severed hands
 by several means
 ‘several’ means two
 or
 several means more than two
 which means...
 My may my maybe
 may just be

I. am. South. African. But. *Indian*. Unspecified generations ago (is it five or is it six? More?), my mother’s and father’s ancestors came to this country from India on ships, indentured labourers harnessed by the politic-economic forces of the British empire, in hock to cut cane. Sugar cane. The vast estates established along the eastern coast of what was then Natal. Hulett’s. The name of this sugar empire family is as familiar to me as teaspoons of sugar slowly stirred into tea; how many cups a day? But whether it was in the fields of the colonial Hulett’s or of white family X, most of the whys, I do not know. I do not know where my great-great-grandparents laboured. Only that they did.

The specifics remain unnamed. In my mother’s family, there is a story that has been passed down. It goes like this. A female ancestor was a Catholic evangelist. She was walking near the shore one day and saw a mass of people leaving on ships. Heading to another land. A sudden idea came upon her: the thought, in the thinking, that it could be a wonderful opportunity for her to evangelise on a large scale, to spread The Word further abroad. And so she decided to leave India and got on the ship with them, all of these unknown others, and all to spread The Word of God. This woman would come to be known in my family as the first Gabriel.

My father’s family has a more traditional arrival story. They arrived in Greytown and before beginning their work in the fields, were baptised into Catholicism, because this, the Master said, was the right thing to do, the holy water (wider and more welcoming than the Kala Pani) would potentially carry these dark peasant people one day to the King of Salvation. Their original surname was taken and replaced with Simon. That is one version of how we came to be. That is all we know. How this story sits (and fits) with the stories of

indentured labour, I may one day discover. Do I believe that perhaps religious service is but another complex form of economic servitude?

As a young poet who is a South African Indian Catholic woman, I was already formally categorised into several groups. Two categories stood out and remained especially difficult to negotiate: my 'Indianness' (or, my *South Africanness* of Indian descent) and my femaleness. South Africa is a country celebrated for diversity and this is seen as key to our utopian collective identity. However, my multifaceted 'Indianness', exchanging aspects from various South African and Durban Indian cultures, provided me with a complicated entanglement of cultural history and agency as part of my identity. This is especially so since my hometown, Durban, is a place of complex cultural concoction. Durban is the second biggest city in South Africa, home to about one million descendants of Indian diaspora. Eighty percent of the Indian diaspora of South Africa live in Durban. 'Indianness' is not simple in such a diasporic space. (Perhaps this complexity is inevitable, even if I think back to so-called family 'origins': in India there are divisions experienced between North and South Indians, between Hindu, Muslim and various Christian religions, and furthermore within the powerful hierarchies of the caste system.)

Let me briefly discuss the term diaspora or diasporic. The word derives from the Bible, and initially relates to the dispersing of the Jews from their original homeland to foreign territories. However, diaspora has evolved from this selected event into a notion describing the movement of people away from their origin: a migration from a homeland and/or birthplace to an unfamiliar cultural-geographical space, a movement that occasions the isolation or dislocation of an individual or a people. Today diaspora may be recognised as the cultural mobility of so-called postcolonial subjects, and is an apt term to describe the movement of my ancestors from one geographical locale to another, as well as in respect of cultural affiliations and accommodations. Diaspora leaves an imprint of the homeland and/or culture to which the following generations keep its remnants while assimilating with the new culture (or cultures) and geographical space. It is a form of multiplicity which serves as an enabling reminder, to me, that my assumed 'Indianness' is neither pure nor whole, and need not answer to the misleading imperative of the homogeneous.

In current South Africa, so-called Indian identity interacts with and is influenced by 'Whiteness', 'Blackness' and 'Colouredness' to name but a few links. It is not the separate category that vestigial tick boxes on official forms would have us believe. (Nor, need I say it, is 'Indianness' in the South African context synonymous with the Guptas and state capture,

an alliance which has fed the flames of entrenched local assumptions, among many black people, about ‘The Indians’ as a self-serving, exploitative group.)

My home town of Durban is a port city, which means flux, flow and cultural hybridity. It is also where adaptations of once British cultural traditions (such as tea time) are commonplace and prevalent. Some of the hybridity creates tension and often the parts do not reconcile with each other. For instance, as a child, I was never allowed to whistle because my grandmother and mother said this would call snakes into our house. That superstition is particular to young girls of Indian descent, and even without any deep anthropological investigation, I can imagine its sexualised implications. And I often find myself thinking: but we are all practising Catholics and arguably should not hold to such a superstition. However, this and other superstitions that we retain co-exist with our Catholic belief systems, sliding between various forms of inherited family spiritual traditions and epistemologies. My ‘Indian’ identity moves constantly in and between the tensions and perplexities and thoughtless naturalisations that are generated.

My familial traditions hold within them Indian, Catholic, British and South African aspects providing me with a complex but diverse ‘Indianness’. Tea time is one of these meeting points demonstrating the fluid hybrid inflections. Again, it seems that it is the female offspring who are tasked with the keeping (and making) of such knowledges; having the implied and practised duty of passing them on. Daughters have a very important role of servitude within the family. When visitors arrive at home, the eldest daughter is to make a mug of tea for each individual visitor. If the eldest daughter is not available to perform her duty, the next daughter must step in. Serving tea is usually the duty of the unmarried daughter/s. The traditions shift. We mug them up. The traditions stay, as the eldest daughter knows:

Tea

At home, we have no tea tray.

Tea is served in each hand one by one by hand cup balanced on saucer
everything all in already added.

No one asks “Milk and sugar?”

Tea is simply served.

Though it must be brought to the guest properly
accompanied by Marie biscuits or Eat-sum-mors.

Tea is my job. I know it well.

my godfather – tea black, two sugars

my aunt – tea (hot milk!) and quarter sugar

my father – tea double sugared, two sugars boiled

he takes his tea with the bag in milk, then more boiled water added after. He told me
his grandfather warmed the cups with hot water before making tea, which apparently
is the proper way.

He never said which grandfather, which side.

Was it his father? I don't know

I don't know why I wonder about that.

I take tea but never drink it.

You can always find a cold cup and know it's me.

Modes of traditional and familial Indian understandings of femaleness chafe against modern interpretations of what it is to be a woman in South Africa, and globally. Familial cultural traditions are held in esteemed regard but so too are expectations of higher education for young Indian women. The addition of pop culture and feminism make it difficult for such young women to situate their femaleness as the singularly most important element of their identity: always hovering is 'Indianness', and its assumptions within the family, and wider society. But although it is difficult, there is validity in experiencing femaleness as multiple inflections rather than struggling with the inability to fit into a coherent, single position. Perhaps there is something open and creative in living amongst the gaps and fragments? My femaleness is influenced by my breadwinner grandmother and by Sylvia Plath; by equally-partnered working parents, and by feminist literary studies. Can singling out a single mode of femaleness even be done?

My mother speaks of 'talking stories'. This is what our subset of Durban Indians says for gossip and/or news about our extended families and friends. This is one of the ideas that contributed to my own writing. In my culture, the women are *always* 'talking stories'. It is a group action but an individual activity as well. Interestingly, my own finding of voice has entailed discovering uneasy meeting grounds between such family stories and more academic

ideas. How did feminisms and feminist literary studies come to influence my female identity? Culturally speaking, I was from a patriarchal background and my first exposure to feminism was in university. Coming home with the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the gleanings from many feminist critical and fictional texts, I told my mother about what I had learnt and how I was inspired. My mother said, “It’s fine if you have to study it,” this ‘Feminism’, “but don’t bring it into our house”. In such split circumstances, my early feminist thinking as a developing poet led me to Adrienne Rich’s assertion that “poetry has the capacity – in its own ways and by its own means – to remind us of something we are forbidden to see” (2006: 143), but also that Audre Lorde was correct in proposing that “your silence will not protect you” (1984: 41). However, I could not strictly follow one kind of feminism. The multifaceted, conflicting nature of my identity led me to Helene Cixous’s suggestion that a “woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement” (1976: 875). I sought to bring together the ideas I had discovered into a feminism and femaleness that could contain a strong cultural presence and currents of feminist thought. This is reflected in a line from one of my poems, quoted above: “I take tea but never drink it./You can always find a cold cup and know it’s me”. I was a young woman like many others, harassed by conformity and hungry for rebellion; on the edge of preferred cultural disposition but articulating a femaleness that is self-scripted. As a word artist, I had also begun to write this articulation into poems such as “Tamil Familiars” and “Tea”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Language

Another diversity to traverse is that of language. My language also rendered me different, as there is a dialect (the so-called Indian South African English) said to be spoken primarily by Indians in Durban. English is my mother tongue but I did not grow up speaking traditional British English, and that ‘lack’ one may hear in my accent, which is indebted to palimpsest ‘mother tongues’. *A Dictionary of South African Indian English* has been useful for me to explain this particular diversity. Rajend Mesthrie has compiled a reference book of numerous strange and intrusive words – yet to me familiar and comfortably accommodated words - that often interfered with the English that South African Indian children learnt in primary school. He asserts that:

Since the 1960s English has become the main language of Indian communities of South Africa in a vibrant form, retaining a great deal of important religious, cultural and culinary terminology from India as well as showing considerable creativity in adapting the English of queen and colonist to the contexts in which Indians find themselves.

(2010: v)

Mesthrie makes an important point regarding adaption and adoption. This is a key feature for my dialect as it is very much incorporative of the words, rhythms and syntaxes of other languages that it has encountered over time. However, though this syncretised dialect is diverse and innovatively adaptable, it is still considered, in the general South African culture, to be an incorrect way of speaking. For example, in Durban ‘Indian’ speech, the word ‘but’ can be used as in standard received meaning and syntax to indicate a contradiction, mark an exclusion or a qualification – yet the “word may occur at the *end* of a clause or sentence” (Mesthrie 2010: 37, my italics). In addition, ‘but’ can also mean “‘Isn’t it, really, [or] truly though’. This sense only occurs at the end of a clause or sentence” (Mesthrie 2010: 37). Here is a point of conflict in my childhood, carried in the apparently simple, unproblematic word ‘but’. At my primary school, previously a ‘Whites Only’ primary, teachers drilled us in Standard English. There were to be no deviant ifs and buts when it came to correct English. At home but, this word always found its habitual ‘displacement’, hanging on the end, and being used more like an adverb.

Consider an example. In my poem “Sheep’s head” (202), the speaker is listening to her aunt tell her mother something about her – “‘One day maybe she’ll talk but.’/I heard her say this to my mother”. (Indian children are often spoken about while present.) The first line is a classic example of how ‘but’ is used in South African Indian English. In another poem called “Betel-nut” (222), the speaker says “The Indians, they put eyesⁱⁱⁱ on me except/ when I go to Chatsworth^{iv}/ then my sentences end but”. The speaker holds a conscious anxiety about how she is viewed by her fellow Indians if she does not speak in the same Indian English. Thus when she goes to one of the largest Indian suburbs of Durban, her English changes from Standard English to so-called Indian English. So ‘but’ adapts, as she feels she must adapt, moving between versions of cultural identity in contexts which claim her differently.

Which context has priority?

Must one context take preferential power?

Can both co-exist (they do, they must)?

Both/and.

Not either/or.

Can poetry be a language
with the power to bring
my differences together
in memorable ways?

Another example of South African Indian English is the word ‘how’. I will refer to Mesthrie’s research again, where he defines ‘how’ as being used “in a negative manner, used in rhetorical questions referring to unpleasant events” (2010: 101). A common expression in my family is “How you can be like that?” It is used when someone is being negative towards another, whether playfully or not. ‘How!’ is also used alone as “an exclamation of surprise or exasperation” in response to an action or utterance which the listener finds disconcerting or unexpected (Mesthrie 2010: 101). This is a mode of verbal expression I frequently use – but only in Durban. When I am not in Durban, this usage, and many others like it, falls away.

How but? No...
How!

Answer? Because I am conscious of having moved to a different cultural context, one in which my identity will be stereotypically marked and judged, according to how I speak, my English becoming a way to blend in or to stand out, language being as much a feature of being as skin.

When am I skinned, skinless, thick thin-skinned,
fully fat and skinny of sounds strange,
estranging, comforting?

Answer? Because I simply do not hear such usages, when I am out of habitual context, and thus they contract and shrivel in my linguistic repertoire, waiting for the water of community connection so that they may once again swell into the presence of the ear.

When do I wear ear plugs, and when not?
How can I always be sure I will
even find my ear bud?

Answers are doubtlessly complex. It is enough for me, as a poet with an ear for language, that I am acute to such shifts, and that they become wonderful resources for writing.

Naming

There were many difficulties which made ‘me’ unable to fit into clear, bounded moulds of ‘I’, in my search for an experimentally expressive ‘I am’. A small example is my name: Francine Simon. My parents named me with an English sounding self. Given the surname Simon, the combination of my ‘Christian’ name and given family name are always called out by those who do not know me in anticipation of receiving the expected, given answer: ‘Whiteness’. The surprise on the faces. The flicker of uncertainty. Oh, *you* are Francine Simon! As if I – my *I* - ought to be unsure. (I *am* unsure, as my discussion in this chapter indicates, but uncertainty is *my* intellectual-experiential prerogative, not one to be thrown over me like a net, by others.)

In my name, naming as a way or process of fixity is being disrupted. The designator *Francine Simon* is mediated by patterns of fixity (the usual interpretation of my first name as culturally French and white, or at least a derivative of St Francis, perhaps?) *and* by ripples of shift, in the gesture of Indian South African parents who chose to give their eldest child an English sounding name that does not visibly or audibly enunciate ‘Indianness’. I value these tensions in my name. They answer to my imaginative need for subjectivity to be subject to the fluidity of mobile claims and possibilities.

This seems a good point at which I can ‘talk stories’. My sister is at university in Pretoria, and during a holiday at home, she shared a fascinating story about naming. (Contributing to the sense of flux and movement on which the story turns, the narrating very aptly occurred as we were driving in Durban.) She began: at college, her ‘Indian’ friend (one of few), was a girl she’d always called by the specific given name with which the girl had introduced herself. Then one weekend she was invited to stay at this girl’s family home. There, the girl’s mother called her by a completely different name. My sister, confused and embarrassed, asked her friend if she had been calling her the wrong name. Oh no, her friend said, her mother was calling her by her ‘house-name’. This name, quite literally, was used only by close family members and only in the house, meaning ‘at home’. In comparison, the name by which she was officially known, in everyday life, was her formally given first name, the name recorded on her birth certificate. The ‘house-name’^v, though, was not written anywhere; it was only spoken, and even then only by immediate family. My parents were not surprised by the story my sister told. To them, the concept was familiar, a practice quite usual in many Indian households. A custom, even. However, the entire of my two families, paternal and maternal, did not use ‘house-names’. This was a cultural practice that my Christian family did not participate in. Of course, my sister and I demanded explanations! My parents

could not give answer. When I persisted (perhaps like an indignant child), to settle the matter my father said, “Well, ok, we can give you one now. How about...thungachi?” The word was odd to my ears. My mind spelt it as it sounded. We all started laughing. Soon I knew what that meant: little sister. I was physically smaller and often mistaken for the younger of two sisters. Though my name should have been “Akka” or older sister, “Thungachi” was the name given to me by my father, mistakenly or not. To this day, that name is used by my family to describe me. It has become a running joke, but affectionately so. Secretly, I have become attached to it and I like to think that ‘Thungachi’ is a good name to help me conceptualise the hybrid fragments of my identity. Possibly, this is also because I have no second name like the cousins from my mother’s side of the family, as my father did not believe double naming was necessary. He did not have two names of any sort, only one, so why should his daughters need more? My English-sounding name and these cultural disruptions in naming coincided within me and sometimes the inexplicability became generative for the poetry I was writing and would continue to write much later on.

As one can gather, my position as a young ‘Indian’ woman in Durban and indeed elsewhere in South Africa is complicated. My femaleness is influenced by familial pressures from traditional patriarchal culture, yet, this is also mediated by the changes that have accumulated in this culture over time. There is struggle and congruence, patterns of fixity which are nevertheless also subject to the fluidity of different, mobile claims on identity. In short, my ‘Indianness’, even with the racial-cultural emphasis that this term accrues locally, has afforded me ample opportunity to deliberate its productively incomplete varieties in writing poetry. In this process, my femaleness emerged as equally complex, sometimes marginal, but more often pushing to the foreground because it was not well-accommodated, even in ideas of non-linear cultural shift. Questions persisted. How to locate my sense of identity as a young female poet of Indian South African extraction? “I took a deep breath” – and another and another – “and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am”. The very thinking and saying enabled me to create links among fragmented facets.

And she who names herself poet?

Adding another identifier to a list of negotiable claims, the name ‘poet’ made it even more difficult for me to imagine navigating a single path of personhood. ‘Poet’. What was this category? What was the *use*? Why bother to aspire to the name? And who might help me meet the demands of the task?

Mentoring seemed a means. It would enable me to explore questions of gender and genre through other more experienced poets, or perhaps even one other more experienced poet. Given my own cultural inflections, I sought to find a South African Indian female poet who posed similar questions about her uneasy identity and its placement amongst the national cultural groupings into which we as South Africans are constantly (re)divided.

This was a failed attempt. In retrospect, I should have known better, since poetry comes to us in ways unexpected, from cultural sources that may lie far from home, but live locally in books or Internet links, gripping the imagination with a reassuring firmness not felt since a parent's hand hold, or with the erotic arousal of a lover's touch. It was in a female poetic oeuvre remote from South Africa that I discovered an inspirational way of thinking about mentoring, and influence. Eileen Myles is a lesbian poet from the New York, and she reconceptualises the connection between mentor and mentee via the borrowed Italian term "affidamento":

There is a word in Italian, *affidamento*, which describes a relationship of trust between two women, in which the younger asks the elder to help her obtain something she desires. Women I know are turning around to see if that woman is here. The woman turning, that's the revolution. The room is gigantic, the woman is here.

Myles (1994: np)

Strange, perhaps. What does an 'old', 'white', 'lesbian', 'American' female poet have to do with a young South African Indian woman writer finding her way in the poetic landscape of her own country? The difficulty of arriving at an answer is implied in the slippery 'scare quotes' which distantly embrace some terms, in the above sentence, and which leave others alone – ignoring? Enabling? I will try to conceptualise responses as this chapter develops. But for now ('for now, but'), I will let the notion sit where it does, causing a little discomfort, even while it wants to offer a guiding route forward. What I do wish to emphasise, though, is the importance to me in my developing career as a poet of *female* inspirational models. It's not that male writers are unimportant. Hardly. For Myles a "butch lesbian poet for whom male identification...is paramount" (Nelson 2007: 174), in terms of "poetic models" she actually had "many more fathers" because on the poetry scene, it was "mostly men who were doing the talking" and she "wanted to know what you had to know to be in the conversation" (quoted in Nelson 2007:174). As Nelson notes, for many female poets, this is familiar, "the natural effect of a male-dominated canon" (2007:174).

But I was looking for a female model whose ‘I am’, like mine, could persuade a young female poet to understand the unreconciled shifts between cultural affiliations and gender politics that I had begun to write about. I had, in Myles’s words, turned around to seek out a woman poet who could help me to obtain some sense of definition in regard to my own poetry. I desired this missing poet, this model who might authorise my own awkward, provisional attempts to write an unusual, culturally marginal, culturally diverse, form of poetry. I sought out the similarities from the poetic traditions I found intriguing. The ‘I’ in my poetry followed lyrical, confessional modes but also favoured experimentation with structure, subject matter and voice. My lyrical ‘I’ was an anticipator of the shifts which I experienced and transposed into a space where I had considered myself to be alone. Through it all, I desired a female model if I was to discover this place for myself, *of* myself, less a room of my own than the familiar company of fellow female strangers, writers who could enter without formally knocking. Strange. This looking for mothers. Or was it, really, looking for female ‘others’ in whom like-ness could be not merely mirrored, in some simple sense of mimetic reflection of experience, but refracted and fractious, oblique and leaking, provoking me towards an uneasy aesthetic?

In South Africa, there was a relative absence of page poetry by Indian South African women (or – how to name the strange – women poets from South Africa of Indian descent). The little writing that I found did not suffice in reconciling shifts in ‘Indianness’ and femaleness in my particular context. I was at a loss. Instances were scarce: a few scattered poems by Sumeera Dawood, Devarakshanam Govinden, Nedine Moonsamy. On the local scene, perhaps it was the very scarcity of the kind of poetry I was seeking that heightened my sense that the poetry work I wanted to do as a woman of particular colour and ethnic culture was urgently valid. Additionally, the scarcity made me melancholy, it left me feeling unmoored, and led me to think more carefully about questions of culture as the subject of my poetry – as a way of mediating lost family traditions and histories, and to place this in tension with the less evidently ‘Indian’ impulses of experimental form that increasingly began to intrigue me, along with the transgressive exploration of female embodiment. I’d come to poetry by way of the education system. At the time, I was barely educated in the history of poetry and emphasis in the school syllabus fell on canonical gems. I so clearly remember reading “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802” in English class and being mesmerised, but feeling foreign. William Wordsworth is iconic but I could not ‘adhere’ myself to his poetry. Other major poets whose work we encountered were William Shakespeare, John Donne, Robert Browning, Dylan Thomas and – one concession to the

local - Douglas Livingstone. This was a male canon, with a few women poets added for the balance: Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath and the sudden surprise of a voice whose contours range locally true, Antjie Krog.

Prompted by: Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath was an early “affidamento” in my formative poetic years, although I did not at that point know the term. But I would like to acknowledge her informing presence in this chapter. A certain teacher spent a few lessons on Sylvia Plath, covering her female subject matter, and poetic voice. I learnt the word ‘confessional’, to describe a school of poetry that favoured the personally expressive ‘I’, and dealt with private or interior life experiences which were frequently inspired by the autobiographical, and indeed were often psychologically fraught. This was an inviting approach to poetry writing, for a schoolgirl already becoming conscious of the fragmented cultural repertoires which comprised her very short life experience. We studied “Mushrooms”. Then “Metaphors”. Then “Stillborn”. And finally, “You’re”. After this, I was determined to get Plath’s collected poems, which I found in the adult section of the municipal library. I had to ask my mother to take out the book for me, as I was too young. Line by line and word for word, I immersed myself in Plath’s poetry. The poems were opaque, incredibly dense. There were flashes of recognition. There were high walls to scale, and depths to plumb. Gradually, the incomprehensible poems opened up into something alluring to the young South African Indian schoolgirl, the confounding sense of sameness that may reside in supposed difference.

Plath imbued difference intricately into her poems. There was an intimate femaleness to the voice in her poetry that I had not encountered before. Plath was a mythical creature to my younger self. Through her poetry, she could claim any identity that she wanted *and* she was a woman. In “Mirror”, the speaker is the mirror and speaks with its voice. In “Lady Lazarus”, the speaker is “a smiling woman” in the process of perpetual dying, the “same, identical woman” with every death. In “Ariel”, the speaker is “God’s lioness” and “White Godiva”. The speaker(s) seemed to channel ‘Plath’, but also escaped simple identity at the same time, living a spectral, projected poetic life never completely reconciled with the poet’s material reality. Generally, the speaker was often a female character but an uneasy tone featured throughout many of Plath’s poems. The poet positioned her life experience in relation to the ‘I’ of a poem but then further in a poem casually violated the pact a reader might have begun to make with the ‘I’. She was “The lioness,/The shriek in the bath,/The

cloak of holes” and “a root, a stone, an owl pellet,/Without dreams of any sort” (Plath 2008: 224, 134). She could be “all mouth”, this ‘I’, speaking out, and taking in. Vocal and swallowing. I suggest that such unease productively generated a non-conformist confessional ‘I’, constellating into a repertoire of fragmented, diversified ‘I’s’ which often found expression in a violent surrealism. The paradox was that Plath’s lyric or intimate expression could and did rebel against the very norms through which she wrote and found self-articulation.

As a teenager, I sensed that Plath could write ‘I’ via all of these metaphors and did not seem to feel the need to resolve the questions of why or how the speaker could be one or all of them in the poems. The shape-shifting capacity of the poetic was its own subversive self logic. It became apparent to me that though Plath affirmed the confessional claim of ‘I’, she also claimed varied spaces for her ‘I’ which she used to express the difficult differences of female relation. These irreconcilable differences did not need to be reconciled. They existed in a place that was not (a non-place?).

Although I did not know it then, Plath’s poetry set ground for several insights at which I would much later arrive. Firstly, in a poem, there did not need to be a single place or person of the ‘I’; secondly, the confessional lyric form was not synonymous with conventionalism and lack of experimentation; and thirdly, that a poet may find odd affinities in remote elsewhere. And yet, I suppose I carried the limitations of our education system with me into my poetry writing, for even as I began to reach beyond narrow received constraints, attempting to mediate beyond the limits of gender and culture that strained to confine me, I also initially found the most affirming expressive possibilities in the familiar generic form of the personal lyric. Perhaps I fell into this zone of comfort. Perhaps I fell for it, under the desire for a Plath-like persona?

I was falling in-between. And, at this fragile stage, ‘in-between’ seemed nowhere. In terms of femaleness, I was falling between familial and societal expectations. In terms of “Indianness”, I was falling between Indian and Catholic and also South African cultures. It seemed I was always falling between somewhere and never really able to assimilate. However, gradually, I began to enjoy being sidled up between all my diversities and differences. My poetry developed in the way a root could grow – “secret, lateral, spreading”. “Very quietly” (as Plath remarks in her poem “Mushrooms”), once my diversities had “acquire[d] the air” and been shaped into poems that took strange directions, I had diversities to explore, complexities which were developing in parallel modes. There were “so many of us!” as Plath observes of mushrooms, albeit discreet and almost invisible (1959: np).

Non-place and mobile thinking

As I developed as a poet, and moved on from Plath – or moved through her poetic practice towards somewhere other than where I had begun – I was intrigued by an article by Vincent Broqua called “Delineating a ‘non-place’ in the UK? 10 notes on experimental poetry written by women”. The notion of the “non-place” came to form a generative means of conceptualising the unsettled spaces out of which contemporary female experimental poets may work, refuting the narrowness of ‘schools’ of poetry, for example, and allowing for transnational fields of influence beyond national borders. I consider this “non-place” to be one that can provisionally situate and yet repeatedly also re-locate the writing of female experimental poets in their prolific and varied exploration of boundaries such as self, language, style, and subject. This is a generative tension. Drawing on Broqua, I suggest this ‘non-place’ not as a negative that fails to find “the exact counterpoint of a fixed territory” secured through the “definition of essential limits”, but as a productive, relational field of criss-crossing conversations, influences and imaginative territories. The ‘non-place’ then potentially overcomes the defining lack that supposedly typifies female experimental poets (too few, too marginal, too elite, too difficult...) or women poets who experiment.

As in Plath’s “Mushrooms”, the ‘non-place’ was an idea which “discreetly,/Very quietly” started taking up residence in my mind as I experimented as a poet. I also consider this ‘non-place’ relevant to the poetic selves of the three women poets I have chosen to explore in this chapter. The ‘non-place’ allows innovative women poets the space to move and, in doing so, they could be able to freely create. Without the confines of a single school of poetry, they could borrow from different influences and styles. Different cultures can coincide without the need to reconcile in the ‘non-place’. Femaleness and ‘Indianness’ did not need to be separated and addressed alone but could be relocated into my ‘non-place’. This links to the notion of mobility, which is a challenge to fixity. In respect of identity, fixity – the assumption that an identity forms to completeness and then stands unchanged, able simply and directly to be expressed – is far too linear a thought to define the identity of women, and indeed of contemporary female poets. But why then is mobility so important for this kind of study in poetry? The ability to be mobile, and for mobility to be a form of ongoing possibility, is attractive to me as someone who is interested in experimental women’s poetry. Mobility may be considered a nomadic way of conceptualising the varied forms of women’s innovative poetries in their reworking of entrenched ideas of the individualist lyric self. Mobility allows a poet to look at ‘her self’ as an assemblage of variously articulated components, some coming to the fore, others receding, and the ‘whole’

constantly subject to morphing shifts and realignments, circumstances depending. In other words, it is not merely the case that a female poet ‘has’ a self which she then ‘expresses’, but that selving entails working out of self and then back inside, finding and following densely obscure paths that fold back into an unfamiliar yet alluring past or a projected, surreal future.

This is crucial in understanding my own notion of poetry and my preferred aesthetic. The female poets to whose work I refer in this chapter (and writers of a Gurlisque tendency addressed in the subsequent chapter) explore ‘experimentalisms’ in sexuality, subject matters, language and form. Also pertinent, in relation to my own poetry, is that the term ‘mobility’ is useful in comprehending the various pressures exerted upon poetic ‘experimentalisms’ by women poets. As I have already noted as a key pressure of this study, there are women “experimental poets who pit the impossibility of identity against the necessity of identity” (Keller, J. 2009: 108), and I am interested in exploring the shapes which such an apparent incongruence may take. Redell Olsen, too, has recognised that contemporary women writers of innovative poetry have “a complicated relationship of rejection and assimilation towards the lyric” (2008: 375). She explains that the ‘I’ is conditional, “involved in explorations of ...limits and possibilities” performed through experimentalism (2008: 380). I am aware that there is a paradox here, in that while I am challenging normative identity categories and advocating for fluid concepts of identity, I accept, however, that a female poet may, for strategic reasons, choose sometimes to *affirm* an identity. This could be seen as a provisional fixity where the female poet chooses to settle for a time. Clearly, the ideas of mobility and ‘non-place’ are intriguing shapers of my own search for an aesthetics of the in-between. This bears not only upon cultural and gendered positions but, as will emerge in the dissertation, upon the claims my imagination experiences.

Searching Beyond: Finding Meena Alexander

In my search for a sense of individual inspirational South African Indian woman poet as role model – in effect my longing for a form of writerly connection and community beyond the isolationist emphases of personal lyric voicing – ‘Indianness’ as one of my two primary foci became the identitarian impulse that pushed me outwards from the South African context and into the global space of the Indian diaspora. This was when I stumbled on Meena Alexander’s collection, *Illiterate Heart* (2002).

I was attracted to her deftness with the form of the lyrical poem, which enabled the explorative expression of her Indian femaleness. The “lyric poem is generally conceived of as

an emotionally invested, autobiographical mode of expression marked by assumptions of ‘the unified lyric subject and notions of transparent...language’ that serve the standard ‘conventions of interior revelation’” (Murray 2011: 16). Alexander, for her part, asserts that lyric “poetry takes as its purview what is deeply felt and essentially unsayable; that is the paradox on which the poem necessarily turns” (2013: np). She also considers that “the lyric poem is a form of extreme silence which is protected from the world”. (Bear in mind, in relation to this claim, that Alexander has written many poems of the September 11 attacks in 2001, and that even more generally, lyric voicing may offer a mediating space for the exploration of the poet’s self in highly charged sociopolitical contexts of diasporic Indianness and femaleness.) For Alexander, the lyric poem provides a generative space where a female poet can negotiate claims upon her identity in forms that both use and dis-abuse the confessional mode. Notably, Alexander offered me access to debates about how a female poet might represent a multiple form of ‘Indian’ identity, dis-orientating orientalist essentialisms by placing selves in places where language calls ‘self’ into question. Working with Alexander’s diasporic poetics, I welcomed their possibilities for thinking about what it meant to write as a member identified as part of a group (‘Indian’, ‘female’, ‘poet’...) which also depended on mobile relations of tension and difference.

The connection I experienced was powerful. The first noticeable aspect in the collection was Alexander’s bringing together of the diversities which comprised her identity, yet holding on to her cultural and geographical heritage. This I felt I could identify with. She wrote in the personal ‘I’ of lyrical poetry, exploring the discrepancies of an ‘I’ that was informed by her life’s movement from continent to continent. How did her understanding of ‘Indianness’ develop through the experience of living in many places? How did her femaleness interact with this mobility? Much of the poetry seemed to contain a hyper-awareness of her past as it related to family history, and I was enthralled. As it happens, too, Meena Alexander had even visited my home city of Durban, as an invited performer at the 2002 international poetry event, *Poetry Africa*. (Alexander recalls this visit in an interview, remembering Durban as a place of Indian diaspora in which she found cultural affinity.)

Sense of place is fundamental to the female identities which inform Alexander’s poetry. The different locations in which she has lived and/or travelled to nuance the larger theme of diaspora and how place can affect one’s sense of self. (Note: my purpose here is not to chart a detailed literary geography of Alexander’s poetry.) As a young child, Alexander was already moving to various locales, spending her summers in southern Kerala while she lived in her birthplace, Allahabad. The latter city has a powerful presence in her more recent

work, as in her 2013 collection. In “Birthplace with Buried Stones”, she writes “I came into this world in an Allahabad hospital,/Close to a smelly cow pasture”, and in a formally reconciling movement of dirt and affective desire, the poem ends with Alexander “Heaven bent,/Blessing my first home” (2013: np). It seems Alexander often makes the choice to retain Allahabad as a potent signifier of what India means to her. The city becomes more even than a material locale, but a metaphorical force in her poetry. At the age of five, Alexander’s father was posted to Khartoum, Sudan and as a five year old, Alexander crossed the Indian Ocean to Africa. For Alexander, Sudan was formative in two ways: it was her first experience of diasporic displacement; the place where, at only thirteen, she enrolled at Khartoum University to study English and French Literature. Secondly, it was in Sudan that the young Alexander began to publish poetry, in a local newspaper, her English verses having been translated into Arabic. Translation is important in understanding her writing. She often uses different languages (Italian, French, Arabic, Malayalam) and asserts the right to an expressive linguistic diversity, where a language is not singular and isolating, but a potential means of finding surprising imaginative connection. The matter of literal linguistic translation also speaks to the experiences of cultural translation about which she writes in her poems, the speakers’ selves moving between forms of cultural affiliation and geographical connection. Alexander travelled to England to pursue doctoral study, graduating from Nottingham University with a doctorate in Romantic literature when she was only twenty-two. She then pursued her academic career in India, teaching at several universities, and publishing several short poetry chapbooks. Two of these have telling titles: *I Root My Name* (1977) and *Without Place* (1978), which imply something of the poet’s diasporic and conditional sense of belonging. In 1979, she is a visiting fellow at the Sorbonne University in Paris and the next, she moves to New York City to take up an assistant professorship at Fordham University, after which she also teaches at Hunter College and Columbia University, among others. It was at Columbia that she published a memoir entitled *Fault Lines* in 1993, looking back at her life in and/as travel. Equally importantly, she published her debut international collection of poetry, *Illiterate Heart*, which went on to win the PEN Open Book Award in 2002. It was in the United States that she also wrote *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009), a critical commentary on her own sense of cultural rupture and unease as an Indian woman in America, especially in an increasingly suspicious political climate.

As even this very brief biography should indicate, this was a woman poet (and postcolonial literary scholar) who seemed the right ‘fit’ as my first “affidamento” figure. She was an Indian woman plotting out the interrupted tracks of diasporic cultural affinities

through fragmented recollections of family, ethnicity, religion, language, and poetics. She saw personal and cultural memory as a crucial part of her poetry, memory being “a place where we locate ourselves, mark ourselves in relation to others”, and then turning this into a site of engagement both linked to and *beyond* actual geography, claiming, “it is in place that we survive” (Alexander 2013: np). For Alexander, indeed, that ‘place’ increasingly seemed, to me, to be located in her body and her body of poetic work.

What attracted me most were the fragments that she presented as unsettled, with a strong lyrical voice, pieces of countries and places where she had lived and experienced which she could not dissolve (or resolve) into a singular, authentic self. Although I had, at that stage, never moved across countries, the cultural melting pot of Durban created an atmosphere apt for a similar hybrid poetics, as did the piecemeal genealogy of my family, and its ruptured historical stories.

Naming places

When they came on the boats
one name was Sing(h).
The other, said and sung
– lost.

Both left in faith
expecting us not
to come back.

Nair (Nayar).
Gabriel. Pillai. Placed here,
those names still carry but
we cannot feel them.

And since we don’t know
my father’s family
we are the last of the Simons.

Nothing left for his daughters
but to be girls.

The lines of connection with Alexander are clear. “Naming Places” emphasises the connections between the cultural-familial, historical event and memory, all of which are important aspects of *Illiterate Heart*. Alexander’s poetry brought into my consciousness so many fragments.

...remember the female ancestor who crossed the Kala Pani under an evangelical impulse.

...remember the family name Gabriel. A host of religious associations. Announcing the catholic allegiance of my mother's family.

...remember the historical event of Indian indentured labourers crossing the Indian Ocean to cut sugar cane in what was then Natal. A legendary feature of my maternal family's mythology.

...remember the old family name: possibly Singh? Had it changed already in India?

...remember: my mother's surname changed. Her mother married a Tamil man: Pillai.

...remember, the Pillais were land-owning, upper castes. My grandmother said: involved with agriculture and the irrigation of plants.

...remember, my maternal grandfather said nothing. He died when I was two years old.

...remember that my father's family names have been forgotten.

...remember that my paternal grandmother was a Nair. (But such a common Indian South African name. Such a large group in India, containing multiple castes.)

"Naming Places" is a circular conversation about naming and the difficulty of finding family names given the disruption of crossing the Kala Pani. The movement of crossing and settling led to the unnamed. Meena Alexander's poems stirred up these connections in me and encouraged me to explore naming as a "process of mapping" (2014: np). One of the major appeals of *Illiterate Heart* was the Alexander' poetic reworking of a family culture. The poems demonstrate that her specific family has its own dedicated culture to which she, the poet and the woman, is attuned, and against which she nevertheless also chafes. This familial identity includes traditional and cultural heritages derived from her family lineage, religion and networks of gendered relations, but it also draws on her diasporic upbringing and both local and foreign education. The complex family is a necessary part of the woman and, thus, the poet's existence. Through Alexander's poetry, I was able to identify this familiar 'family' quality and explore it within my own work. Alexander became a subtle poetic mother; I was turning to her for direction, hoping for answers to my questions. I discovered that fragmentation was not to be feared but welcomed and expressed where different sources became productively diverse subject matter. The lyric voice seemed perfect for *Illiterate Heart*. Why? To write a poetic reworking of her family, express religion and gendered relations from her own experience, lyrical poetry seemed to activate a fragile personal expressivity which was ideal for Alexander's poetic project of difficult and painful

re/membering in this particular collection. This was a teaching moment from my “affidamento”, as I learnt how consciously to consider the ‘I’ as entailing multiple inflections: a woman, a poet, an Indian, a scholar, a daughter... the positions multiply.

Being rhizomatic being

Illiterate Heart debunked any residual ideas I may have held about some ‘true’, singular female subjectivity and introduced the rhizome as a model of identity to the reader. The rhizome continues to be a viable concept of identity, one necessary for an expression of femaleness. Rosi Braidotti engages explanations of this identity model in her book, *Nomadic Subjects*, suggesting that the rhizome “is a root, that grows underground, sideways...against the linear roots of trees. By extension, it is ‘as if’ the rhizomatic mode expressed a non-phallogocentric way of thinking; secret, lateral, spreading” (1994: 22). She postulates a mobile, intersectional, “nomadic consciousness”, which may be a useful framework for my investigation of my own development as a poet in relation to women poets writing femaleness through partial alignments of lyric and other kinds of poetry.

Reading Meena Alexander, and using Braidotti’s theoretical frameworks, I began to consider the extent to which female identity is plural, moving and incessant; now settling, now shifting. How it variously accommodates and reconfigures a highly mobile set of relations amongst categories of experience, historical-political context, received traditions, and linguistic construction. ‘Femaleness’ does not “tak[e] any kind of identity as permanent” (Braidotti 1994: 33), but rather entails a constant mediation amongst different claims, possibilities and contingencies”. What better way to conceptualise Meena Alexander’s debut collection than in partnership with Braidotti’s *Nomadic Subjects*? I suggest that the secret and quiet way of continuous female growth could be seen throughout *Illiterate Heart* as integral to Alexander as a woman and as a poet. Alexander largely views herself as a poet of transience and mobility, a concept which finds connection with Broqua’s notion of the ‘non-place’ addressed previously in this chapter. Alexander suggests that for a female poet, with mobile subjectivities, poetry rather than geographical fixity is the “place that we locate ourselves, work ourselves in relation with others; it is in [this] place that we survive” (2013: np). She has in effect created a diasporic, ‘transitional’ space for herself in poetry. In an interview, she comments:

I'm very comfortable writing in airport and transport lounges
 – the margin between places. Actually in transit lounges, the laws
 of the land do not hold...so this idea of being outside the law in a
 fashion is also very powerful for me... You know, writing as a woman,
 writing as someone who doesn't quite fit into a particular place, I have
 to invent a world... I need to come into existence.

(Joseph 2010: 115)

This quotation has stimulating applications when set in relation to the 'non-place'. Alexander affirms that she does not "fit into a particular place", meaning by implication the nation state, because she is consciously "writing as a woman" which to her mind entails by definition a necessary unbelonging to 'fatherlands'. So she has invented a world, through the imaginative vectors of poetry that enables 'her' to come into her powerful existence as a female poet of the interstitial. If a woman poet cannot place herself firmly within the proscriptive allegiances of the national 'here', or the transnational 'there', the implication might be that she claims the right to blur such bounded binaries, occupying both sites at once, and even creating in the process a purposefully unsettling realm of the 'non-place'. I note that these transit spaces which she references are in effect places without place. They are what the anthropologist Marc Augé describes as "non-places" (in his 1995 volume of the same title). He is, of course, framing this claim within an argument about the emptying out of place caused by supermodernity, in terms of which the architectural-spatial types of the airport or the shopping mall, for example, are generic, stripped of regional or national meaning. Meena Alexander's comment shifts this generic substitutability towards new meanings, though, finding value in the liminal site as one "outside of the law" of given nation. Granted, she is speaking metaphorically, but her idea is that 'non-place' enables for her as a female poet of diaspora a form of imaginative passport to and through poetry. In this way, Alexander's particular view of 'place' works through the transferential, metaphoric capacities of poetry to call into question the obvious politics of geographical situation and nationhood, and invites us to reflect on the lack of 'home' which she experiences as a woman who has lived in many places across the world, where femaleness is habitually a marginal, othered relation to the masculine. Sometimes the 'non-place' is configured not as affirming, but as debilitating; sometimes it is melancholic; sometimes alienating. Most importantly, I assert that she finds in this 'non-place' or the "margin between places" a generative force for the creativity of the female poet.

For me, as a young poet looking out for a female *affidamento* figure who was capable of a re-iterative ‘turning’ and re-turning of versions of dis/located femaleness, Alexander’s perception of herself as a poet and as a woman through an identity that seemed expansively exploratory offered me scope to tackle my complex cultural history in rhizomatic and/or nomadic ways. In an essay by Alexander, “What Use is Poetry?” she explores the notion of place. The question “What use is poetry?” was addressed to Alexander by a woman in the audience after a reading, and the article itself is quite experimental, separated into fourteen short, numbered sections which include poems relevant to the critical conversation. In her response, Alexander explores the idea of a ‘counterworld’, asking “What is this counterworld, this being within our being, this zone of desire that poetry evokes?” The question – itself a mark of unsettlement – carries the development of Alexander’s internal conversation about the ‘place’ of poetry. This ‘place’, I suggest, derives from her diasporic consciousness, which in turn inflects the diverse “zones” of femaleness via which Alexander has created in poetry a customised “counterworld”. This is again linked to the series of “counterpoints” associated with female writing as occupying the ‘non-place’. The emphasis on movement and provisionality in Alexander’s poems, as components of female identity, offered me a gateway into important concepts. As I have said above, identity is not linear or singular especially for a poet coming from a diasporic background, and secondly, as a woman the definitions placed on her and re-defined by herself prompt multiple departures from a narrow, inherited notion of identity. Pressure to ‘be’ a woman, by whatever contradictory societal standards – cultural, political, familial. Pressure to perform ‘as’ a woman, from popular culture and social media. The negotiation of such pressures in the shape of poetry initiated, for me, a *mobility* of thinking and expression. It allowed me to begin viewing my own poetry in mobile ways, rather than feeling obliged to answer to induced pressures of raced identity as a kind of hostage in my own skin (Alexander 2013: np).

Reading *Illiterate Heart*, I discerned the relationality of femaleness in bodies, which entailed forms of giving and of violence, and uneasy disassociation. In “Taxicabwallah”, the female speaker has to “shut my eyes, feeling his ribs under mine”. The touching of bodies seemed catalytic through the notion of a collection of bodies all touching, all subject to vulnerability. This ‘touching’ quality affirms the necessity of the conditional ‘I’, in which self is socially situated, and where the ‘I’ is mobile as an identity which is variously sexual, sisterly, rooted in privacy and silence and yet located in collective context. Consider the poem “Birthplace with Buried Stones”. The poem consists of five parts, all written in two line stanzas, and the very rhythm of the poem is maintained by the coupling energy of this

insistent ‘two by two’. (I will concentrate on the third part and fifth parts of the poem). She writes:

III

In an open doorway, in half darkness
I see a young woman standing.

Her breasts are swollen with milk.
She is transfixed, staring at a man,

His hair gleaming with sweat,
Trousers rolled up

Stepping off his bicycle,
Mustard bloom catches in his shirt.

I do not know what she says to him,
Or he to her, all that is utterly beyond me.

Their infant once a clot of blood
Is spectral still.

Behind this family are vessels of brass
Dotted with saffron,

The trunk of a mango tree chopped into bits,
Ready to be burnt at the household fire.

(Alexander 2013: np)

The third section begins from the speaker’s perception. Earlier in this chapter, I quoted part of the second section saying “I came into this world in an Allahabad hospital,/Close to a smelly cow pasture” and I suggest that this speaker is an autobiographical avatar of Alexander. The speaker is watching a young family, only watching, not otherwise interacting. The “I” is not omnipresent, yet she is closely watching and speaking from a personal place. The “I” is a silent participant, speaking to herself or her readers. The speaker uses her body to speak but is highly observant of bodies in the poem. The woman she is watching is “transfixed” as she (the speaker) is transfixed on the woman. The young woman she is watching is “swollen with milk”. Though the speaker is the observer, she is intruding on a moment of silent privacy. The bodies may not be hers to tell. Nevertheless in Alexander’s customised “counterworld” of poetic place, she is able to speak and be silent at the same time without the need to be strictly one or the other. This is reflected in the characters. What the

man and woman say to each other is “utterly beyond me”, says the speaker. It is not necessary for the speaker and possibly the readers to hear what is being spoken. As this is a moment of silent privacy, it is not the place of the speaker or the readers to insist on being able to hear. What Alexander is producing is bodies that have action and speech, but whose speech is not accessible to anyone else. She is producing these bodies in her ‘non-place’ where she writes about them rather than speaking for them. The tension between body and private space is what Alexander explores, and this also links to the mobile ‘I’ she uses as a device of both poetic observation and sometimes of poetic expression.

The conditional ‘I’ is recurrent in *Illiterate Heart*; the implication is that ‘self’ surfaces and submerges in the diasporic space. Alexander brings to life the relational female self, highlighting plural pronouns in which ‘I’ is but part of the complex collective grammar:

Touching you I think: We pay with our lives,
they become us,

and I need to write as if penitence were
the province of poems.

“Red Parapet” (2002: 73)

Switching from pronouns, swiftly the singular ‘I’ to the plural ‘we,’ is a sign of mobility itself. This shift in pronouns – a tactic which recurs time and again in Alexander’s poetry – is an apt move in relation to rhizomatic identity. However, I still wonder, building on her own questioning: “as if penitence were/the province of poems”. Why? I cannot answer, but the provocation did lead me to think – what should the “province of poems” be for a young woman poet, trying to define her femaleness and her ‘Indianness’? What *could* this province be? Need it be provincial and local...or might it transverse the world?

This was a slow process of personal emergence for me. Through Alexander, I came to realise that ‘I’ had no permanence and that it was, as Olsen suggests, “conditional”. Another poem by Meena Alexander that provides commentary on the conditional ‘I’ and the associated problematics is “Choric Meditation”:

As I brush past the wall
 I hear a voice: *Cara, write your poem well.*
 The hard poem about the self
 when there is nothing quite like it,
 a tiny “i” cleft from its shadow,
 hardly breathing, form’s terror.

(2002: 25)

The speaker acknowledges the difficulty of self writing; she grants the ‘self’ as a perverse form, at once elusive and forming, there being “nothing quite like it”. Even, it seems, ‘self’ ‘itself’ is not easily a resemblance or a clear figure of Self. Instead, we have only “a tiny ‘i’”, lower case, which the computer spellcheck automatically and insistently ‘self-corrects’ to announce the fully-formed, grammatically assertive upper case of clear singular identity position. Here, too, the inverted commas both embrace the ‘i’ and set it apart from other pronouns, and indeed from I, ‘itself’. Via the image of the cleft, the ‘I’ is seemingly split from “its shadow”, causing a kind of slippage, a paronomasia and anxiety that ‘forms terror’ and becomes “form’s terror”. I cannot completely envisage Alexander’s meanings and intentions, but the short extract is packed with productive complexity that prompts me to think that as and when female identity is understood as partially divided, the very female body form is a source of pleasure and pain, of possibility and limit, and that for Alexander, as a woman poet, femaleness can be a repressive, frightening place, as well as a site of necessarily provisional formation, that eludes fixity. (The lure of a non-linear conception of identity can be recognised in this, albeit somewhat paradoxically, since the need to follow traditional modes of poetic structure and lyric expressivity is very strong for Alexander and, as the chapter will show, becomes one of the reasons that she faded, for me, as an authoritative affidavit figure.)

Moving on/to Other Experimental forms

There were two stumbling blocks that became increasingly apparent in my attachment to Alexander as an affidavit figure. First was Alexander’s insistent use of a traditional lyric voice with confessional modes in her poetry in *Illiterate Heart*. Second what I would tentatively call an absence (as subject matter) of the heightened sexual pressure faced by a woman living in the consumer driven twenty-first century. These two elements generated in

me a dissatisfaction, as they did not adequately answer to my own writing of the poetry manuscript that would become *Thungachi*.

Having worked through many examples of Alexander's poetry, I found myself exasperated by her reluctance to push further towards the stylistic innovation that I believed, through my own experience of writing, would enable a female poet to reconfigure questions of poetry, identity politics and femaleness in more complicated directions. I came to see Alexander's poetry as lacking in experimental qualities, finding that this in turn inhibited her ability to create new ways to express rhizomatic connections between form and femaleness. I was slowly turning into another form of poet, turning away from Alexander. I still sought the pressures out under each poem but Alexander's preferred poetic methods and foci gradually opened up as a gap between my writing and hers, a gap which staying with Alexander as an affidavit figure would not enable me to fill. I do acknowledge, though, the capacity of her poetry to churn my own writing, beating it towards a different space. This offering was an animating energy that urged me to look, to turn, to find. The multiplicity of this action itself was a surprise but let me accept that though Alexander seemed increasingly irrelevant to where I wished to go and what I wanted to explore as a poet, her irrelevances still broke open in me the opportunity for a re-imagined poetics beyond lyric confessionalism, making space for other women poets who could offer me vital 'mentoring' collaborations.

But why was I so keen on formal experiment? This was important to me as it encouraged me to move from the familiar, to find ways to accommodate female chafings and in/consistencies. I was following the methods of lyrical poetry to describe my cultural and familial history but those gaps and curiosities where my identity and culture did not meld wonderfully together also did not completely find a good match with lyrical poetry. So instead I shyly created visual representations in my poems to exemplify these 'curiosities'. To demonstrate, I will include my earliest form of tender, gentle experimentation. This is nothing dramatic. Instead, it explores vulnerable alignments between experience, language and form; never pushing too forcefully against familiar grammatical and experimental logics – thereby allowing a reader the comfort of imagined coherence – yet simultaneously acknowledging language as gap, as limit, never fully adequate to the supposed recounting of even personal memory and personal experience:

Late

Girl of seven when I saw the skeleton.
Afternoon at the beach across from the hospital,
a ghost, paled by the sun.

My father sat on the breaker line
waiting for a wave. A she-whale the elephant bones
of a baby cupped beneath her spine.

I walked around head to tail
mother and calf beached picked clean.
I stretched to touch the baby, skull white as an unlit wick.

Then my father was calling, board in hand, and I ran,
presented him with a half-shell story. Asked him
if lady whales had a hospital and if man whales

were allowed to visit. Maybe, he said. She could have been waiting
for her husband. Maybe when I swam he said
I'd hear the deep, long echo the man whale sang, promising his mate
never to be late.

This first instance of experimentation was a represented hesitance. There are no missing words here, just the visual analogue of a “half-shell story”, a ‘thematic’ which was also calculated and structured into both style and the open patterns of thinking, questioning. “Late” used a personal, lyric voice, but an ‘experimentalism’ developed from this poem, animating in the structure an inconsistent female identity which I believed could not be reconciled or fixed through received traditions of lyric poetry. Whatever the eventual limits I perceived in her as an affidavit figure, Alexander had been pivotal in my search for a multiple, nomadic self and the means for cultural-familial history which seemed lost over the Kala Pani, the dark waters of Indian immigrant history in which even our family name was made to disappear.

As I slowly began to turn away from Meena Alexander’s conventional lyric expressivity – a mode that had been well suited to my keen (even *keening*) quest for the possibility that distant familial histories might relate to the contemporary femaleness of my youthful self - the tensions of ‘mobility’ as a force of conceptual movement, poetic practice and a shift towards experimental writing gathered force. The very idea of mobility surfaced as a form of creative nomadic consciousness through which I had come to identify myself as a poet. Mobility accommodated the bubbling liberations involved in envisioning one’s own meaning-making, and which were incessantly churning me along different currents. If mobility in fluid and diasporic senses enabled the “impossibility of identity” to be

provisionally reconciled with the “necessity of identity”, then mobile versions of experimentalism were crucial to my imagining and expressing of the *project* of my femaleness. In short, the concept and practice of mobility has allowed me as a woman poet not to be fixed to a specific style, school or practice of poetry.

Still, it was difficult to find a definition of what I was doing in and with this ‘experimental’ impulse. The experimentalisms I was exploring in poetry were not neatly synonymous with dominant American schools of Experimental Language poetry, for example. And at the time, nor did I know how groups of American women innovative poets had reconfigured the often intellectually abstract, masculinist poetics of ‘the experimental’ towards a more embodied, female-centric writing. Murray shares a similar experience, in discussing “lyric” and “language” as categories of poetic response which characterise her second collection, *open season* (2006). She consciously explored “a ‘lyrical’ aesthetic in relation to experimental ‘language’” (2011: 13). She “felt attractions to affective, personal expression in compressed, image- and voice- based poems of intense observation and insight” – a conventional lyric mode. However, in other poems it was clear that the poet was intrigued by the possibilities and limits of language, the poems “evidently tussling with ideas more than offering descriptions” (2011: 14). I was experiencing a similar tension. Increasingly, I was wanting to write a poetry that could bring the experiential, linguistic and conceptual “impossibility” of my femaleness *and* the “necessity” of my femaleness into disruptive, innovative encounter. In respect of style and idea, I wanted a poetry that could exemplify a space where I could produce a nomadic femaleness, an innovative place which also referenced the not-quite-proper or established ‘non-place’ to which being gendered female so often relegates women in cultural hierarchies, including female poets. As the chapter so far might indicate, I wanted to re-claim this ‘non-place’ – albeit with difficulty – as a place where the im/possible was negotiated, rather than seeing it only as a negative, deficient site of lack.

In a sense, working through the poetry of Alexander helped me to arrive at tentative ideas about innovative poetry, even though she herself was not a practitioner of the experimental. Her diasporic mobility *could* have opened up towards more unusual poetic forms and ideas, but did not. That said, her nomadic consciousness hinted to me that a woman poet need not be imaginatively confined, but could occupy a shifting space that constantly defied and unsettled preferred versions of identity and femaleness. The two other poets whom I briefly discuss in this chapter are also susceptible to understanding under the banner of the ‘nomadic’. Not only have they lived in many different places, they have

repeatedly (re)invented their poetics via experiential, linguistic and discursive shifts that have pushed their understanding of experimentalism into contradictory, difficult-to-articulate spaces, related to their identities as queer woman (Eileen Myles) and black woman (Harryette Mullen). These poets regularly travel, giving rise in their work to forms of critical-conceptual mobility around culture and identity, contributing to difficult creative conversations. They experiment visibly with the validity of the ‘I’, the page, the truthfulness of language as expressive of identity, and with the prospects of poetry as a way of understanding being in the world, in a world in which poetry is a marginal, even inconsequential form. They also draw inspiration from the blurred lines between disciplines, discourses, and artistic practices – performance studies, history, visual arts, literature – manifesting a conceptual and processual nomadism (Blau DuPlessis 2006) which, as a form of writing ‘otherhow’ (Blau DuPlessis 2006), enables them to find innovative angles on the established, well-worn power relations of race, class, and gender that are central to literary analysis.

I came to think of ‘experimentalism’ in poetry by women writers as multiple rather than singular. The women who practise innovative poetry have created a very generative space in which I am able to find a fluid footing, out of my received cultural-geographical position, and even my initial place as a fairly lyrical poet. In this mobile imaginative configuration, I am able to appreciate ‘experimentalisms’ as diverse rather than linear, polyvocal rather than deferring to a monological school or style. As Ann Vickery notes, too, many experimental women poets, even in the emergent context of such writing in late 1970s America, wrote “from positions of ex-centricity...experiencing ambivalence and marginality” (2000:4) in relation to the emphatically male community of the poetic avant-garde. This sense of marginality proved instrumental in leading them away from dominant expectations of an analytic Language poetry towards an elliptical, partial creativity that eluded inclusion in this new, alternative poetic canon. In recognising that women’s ‘experimental’ poetry is an elusive even nomadic category that has tended to be treated as tangential both to more mainstream poetics (see Rowe nd) *and* to the innovations of an experimental canon, I am arguing that experimental female poets attempt to turn a place of marginality into the productive space of the in-between. In this in-between space, encounters amongst otherwise binarised ideas and modes, or between traditional and taboo subjects, can be addressed, and even reinvented. As will become clear in the next chapter, then, I may make a case for experimentalisms that involve not only *form*, but also shocking subject matters, and daring forms of voicing.

Eileen Myles and Experimental Sexual Subjects

As in the case of experiments with form and layout (for example in my poem “Late”), sexuality appeared tentatively in my manuscript through the poem, “Creature”:

Creature

If I could put you on
my belly like an otter
does a crab

and crack you open
with a smooth
dark stone

I would eat you
your grey flesh raw
as a split dawn clam

I would lap up
your small smile
and lick your lips

your coral entrails
dripping from my arms
without a word

At that time, “Creature” was different from the poems I had already written. The ‘I’ is conditional because of the repeated use of ‘could’ and ‘would’ but there is no indication from the speaker as to what the conditions even are. The speaker only seems to indulge in desirous possibility, almost a female agency of desire that is accustomed, animal behavior, quite pragmatic although also rapacious. Structurally, there is no punctuation. The poem morphs from one stanza to the next in a progression that ends abruptly. The poem left me, the writer, in an oddly ambiguous space: this single poem was shockingly expressive of an impulse of embodied femaleness I had barely before admitted, and yet I was not finished with this carnality. It was only the beginning of something more visceral and sensual in my poetic practice as a young female writer. This diverged greatly from the predominant tone and content of Meena Alexander’s poetry. Her work sometimes seemed so polite, decorous, delicately expressive, while increasingly I longed for an “affidamento” figure who wrote a consciously explicit form of female sexual embodiment. Upon reading Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, I searched for a woman poet who

might answer this need. (By some odd serendipity, Rich was also the legendary feminist writer to whom Meena Alexander had chosen to dedicate her title poem, “Illiterate Heart”.)

Although Rich was not an experimental poet (much of her poetry is associated with the emergent women’s rights and experiential female affirmation of First Wave feminism), Rich envisaged a kind of speculative “counterworld” in which women’s reality – whether the woman was heterosexual or lesbian – would not be subject to male power. She advocated for women a form of affirmative thinking and “woman-identified experience” that she called a “lesbian continuum”, believing that this “continuum” could begin to dissolve male power and shift the dynamic in the favor of women (1980: 130-141). When I began to look for an affidavit figure through this new frame, I stumbled upon Eileen Myles. I cannot remember the way I found her; it might have been on YouTube, or on www.poetryfoundation.org^{vi}:

I am always hungry
& wanting to have
sex. This is a fact.

(1991: np)

This was the acknowledged embodied ‘pressure’ that I was desiring in my own emerging poetry, and which I had not found in Alexander’s more lyrically traditional, often conventionally feminine expressions of femaleness. Eileen Myles was unrepentant in her sexuality as expressive of a counter-cultural butch female identity. She was mesmerizing to listen to; she was an accomplished raconteur, regaling her audience with anecdotes between the reading of her poems. She struck me as adept at playing with and deconstructing forms of masquerade, an intriguing capacity, for me as a female poet. Upon hearing herself being introduced to the audience by the organiser of a poetry event, she said it made her feel as if she was wearing a strange wig, one that did not fit and sat awkwardly on her head.

At this stage, I had left Durban, and was living in China, working as a teacher. My own small diasporic geographies had begun to take shape. Half-way across the world, suspended between home and something that was becoming my future, I continued my search for other “affidamento” figures, in the process developing a nomadic consciousness of my own. South Africa. China. Ghostly inherited ‘memories’ of India. A New York poet first encountered on the web...The notion of nomadic consciousness allowed a ‘non-place’ where lessons Alexander had taught me and lessons I was beginning to learn from Myles could co-

exist, without the negation of either one. Nomadic consciousness gave me the inspiration to turn, choose and absorb the embodied ‘Indianness’ of Alexander’s lyric voice, alongside the renegade transgressive female embodiment of Myles, bringing me to a ‘non-place’ where ‘experimentalisms’ with a female poetics became more and more possible.

The femaleness of Eileen Myles was certainly different from my own. She is a lesbian American poet, identities at odds with my heteronormative South African Indian upbringing. However, Myles (born in 1949 in Cambridge, Massachusetts) went to Catholic schools, a little ‘life line’ that held out to me a frail connection. (I was the girl who spent the bulk of my free time in our local church, often as an alter server.) After graduating from university in 1974, Eileen Myles moved to New York, specifically to become a poet, immersing herself in the vibrant counter-cultural creative scene. She began taking part in writing workshops at the famous St. Mark’s Poetry Project, affiliating with a younger group of poets that included the experimentalists Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley and Bill Zavatsky. Eventually, this led to her tenure at the same poetry project, teaching workshops. In what seems an aptly convoluted phrasing: she was a teacher of poetry to aspiring young poets who came to New York to be schooled in poetry of “The New York School”.

As I said, I ‘met’ Myles’s poetry in China, where the browsing of “Eileen Myles” over the internet was not an easy or accessible task. Because of censorship laws, I had to use a proxy software program on my home computer to bypass the Chinese blocks on Google and YouTube and any other websites that were not considered appropriate. As I did not (at that stage) have access to physical copies of her collections (or her fiction, non-fiction, libretti, plays, and performance pieces produced over several decades), I became her watcher and listener, accessing her talks on YouTube and various collected recordings. Her website, www.eileenmyles.com, was interactive and easily accessible. I downloaded her recordings and listened to them while going to work, then I came home and ate dinner with her on YouTube. I had found my next “affidamento”. She emboldened me. I began to take risks I my writing.

Nanni-ma

I think of sex and only
sex since he
became my neighbour

in the flat next door.
And you, in the garden outside,
a goat named Ma.

While drafting earlier versions of this poem, I was unhappy with the initial stanza. It threatened to expose me. To my family. To myself, even. What were these ideas I was thinking? Profane? Pornographic? Could a young, Catholic, South African Indian woman articulate such taboos without risking herself? (Could she keep quiet, suppressing this part of herself, without risk of emotional self-injury?) In China, far from my familiar conservatisms and the multiple pressures of obedient daughter, loving sister and overall good girl, I could begin to make sense of the sexual elements of my femaleness, allowing them to feature in my poetry. Whereas once, in a poem, I hesitated to write a line like “dark as cum” (from the poem “Bride”); or where once I had stalled in finalizing “Kali” (“I woke like a candle/straddled between two fish”), Myles made me less afraid that these lines might seem perverse; made me feel I had the right to want to write them, attesting to female complexity. Myles provided me with an example of bravery and I could keep these lines, accepting the reciprocal invitation of the poem in progress to explore my femaleness.

In talking about her body and the politics of lesbian female embodiment so candidly, Eileen Myles brings into the space of the sexualised body an eclectic mix of registers and images, variously ordinary and philosophical; sometimes even plain or banal. She refuses to establish and respect neat boundaries of expectation and form. The logic of the poem, “Peanut Butter”, for instance, seems channelled, highly organised. Yet the subject matter is elusive, and resists conclusion:

the sensation of
being dirty in
body and mind
summer as a
time to do
nothing and make
no money. Prayer
as a last re-
sort. Pleasure

as a means,
and then a
means again
with no ends
in sight. I am
absolutely in opposition
to all kinds of
goals. I have
no desire to know
where this, anything
in getting me.
When the water
boils I get
a cup of tea.

(Myles 1991:np)

Sexual desire, spiritual longing, the practice of everyday life...the poem engages the process of *being* in the writing, rather than foregrounding lesbian sexuality, or profound statements about art or aesthetics. The poem shapes playfully into a rather phallic column, but the energies of the lines are fluid, recursive, the ideas move and come back, gradually building, building...not to orgasmic satisfaction (“no ends in sight”) but to the simple pleasure, even the bathos, of a cup of tea. The plain language of the poem is stripped of metaphor and decoration, but is still ludic. The poet sets up lovely, slight temporalities that are extremely mobile. The word “absolutely” carries conviction, but the thought processes (and bodily actions) drift, allowing the rough draft, rather than the perfect, polished ‘end product’.

Nor does she set the physical in opposition to other forms of being, spirit among them. If ‘spirit’ is “a last resort”, with pleasure a (preferred) “means”, again and again, nor does pleasure per se, in and of itself, lead her to a desired goal. It is the ongoing process of being a thinking, feeling woman being that repeatedly engages her poet’s imagination. Indeed, the poem continues: “I have/ no desire to know/ where this, anything/ is getting me”. The title, “Peanut Butter”, is a nod towards this endless deferral, the sticky mixture so ordinary, so suggestive, so commonplace and so oddly placed. The poem concludes: “I/ squint. I/ wink. I/ take the ride”, the poet, through the speaker, acknowledging the ongoing mobility of experience that is life’s embodiment.

I revelled in Myles’s work; I read “Peanut Butter” over and over. I even recorded myself reading it aloud on a voice note. She helped me to channel my own voice, a young, tentative female poet speaking through the words of another, more experienced woman. Myles allowed me access to the notion that a woman poet could express her complicated

sexuality and desire without sounding unduly intimate or “confessional”. Myles connected and complicated notions of female embodiment in her poems, often refusing (not bothering?) to disguise herself behind the mask of persona or the shield of intricate, poetic diction. Instead, she shocked a reader via the frankly expressed sense of self *but* even in this process a reader could be left feeling silly at her own sense of shock, when what the poem dealt with was perfectly ordinary, un-exceptional, forms of female desire, daily-ness and blood cycle that for Myles should unquestionably be “part of the score”, part of a “female conversation” that should “show up regularly in the culture’s poems” (quoted in Nelson 2007:172). As an affidavit, Myles suggested a poetry by a woman which mediated impulses of self-expressive documentary and conceptual experimentalism. I admired her “typically fluid and forthright” poems, marked by “surprising turns” and “lascivious wit” (Nelson 2007: 177). I admired her risk-taking. As Myles remarks, “I made the model of what I needed there to be. I put lesbian content in the New York School poem because I wanted the poem to be there to receive me” (Nelson 2014: np). As Nelson notes, “Myles also gestures towards the paradoxical reciprocity of this process: the poem is there to receive you, yet you have to create the poem so that it can receive you” (2007: 172-3). This is similar to Meena Alexander’s comment that “writing as a woman, writing as someone who doesn’t quite fit into a particular place, I have to invent a world... I need to come into existence” (2010:115). In suggesting that “I wanted the poem to be there to receive me”, Myles appears to be expressing the necessity of mobility and nomadic consciousness. Myles too may be seen to use the concept of ‘non-place’ in order to let the space of poetry ‘receive’ her. She needed to oblige the space of ‘the New York poem’ – characteristically male – to become another version of ‘itself’, one in which a lesbian poet could write herself as a lesbian woman, where ‘lesbian’ and ‘female’ were not at odds, where female could ‘be’ its own desired impropriety, un-scandalised by preferred, normative conventions of female sexuality. The concept of the ‘non-place’ enables such connections but also shows the problematics of the usual disconnection. Consider the poem, “Holes”:

...I have so
 many holes in my memory. Between
 me and the things I'm separated
 from. I pick up a book and
 another book and memory
 and separation seem to
 be all anyone writes
 about. Or all they
 seem to let me read...

(1991: 33)

It is the “separation”, the “holes”, which Myles renders part of her – as Alexander might put it – “zone of desire” (2013:np) with some difficulty and perhaps reluctance coming to the recognition that these are forms of ‘loss’ which continue to demand attention, and even to shape her attention. Myles’s poetry became increasingly crucial in my understanding of how poetry might be made by female poets working within a deliberately mobile ‘non-place’, at the margins of both the poetic mainstream and of male-oriented Language experiment, and trying, as an emergent experimental poet, to negotiate the demands of intellectual abstraction as they bore upon the representational claims of the materiality of inescapable embodiment. Maggie Nelson’s critical volume, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (2007) has been helpful here. For example, she points out that the energy that many male experimental poets “have relentlessly focussed on the oral may aim to privilege the performative history of poetry that claims Homer” (thus the heroic, epic mode) “as its source, but it can also effectively displace or sublimate messier, perhaps more voracious bodily processes, such as the anal, the digestive, the hormonal (including the menstrual, the menopausal, and so on), the orgasmic and the cellular” (2007: 172). Myles states that “I want to say something else about my femaleness, which is what interests me, not feminism. Femaleness is owning my woman’s insides” (2014: np). For Myles, her female embodiment demands acknowledgement *as* embodiment, as physical, as much as ‘femaleness’ is inevitably a constructed notion.

Myles has worked through her poetry and other writing genres to reclaim a matrix of terms: female, avant-garde, queer. And, as Nelson remarks, she shows the importance of trying “to consider them together at the point of tension that each deserves” (Nelson 2007:208). Terms such as “lesbian’, ‘woman’, ‘feminism’”, what “each term signifies will necessarily remain subject to endless debate and expansion, while also retaining undeniable power”. Myles even “has fun with...human terms of sexuality and identity” (Nelson 2007:

177), and the familiar descriptors, in Myles's poetry, may have documentary, expressive, sardonic, and melancholic registers, enabling an expansive poetics which unsettles assumptions about 'the' experimental as much as about 'the' lyric. As occurred for poet and scholar Maggie Nelson, so it was for me: "Eileen's particular manner of wielding the personal in public provided me with a way to think about the personal in public – how to continue violating my own privacy in my work... without the antiqued baggage of the "confessional" (2014: np).

In my case, especially intriguing in respect of this "violating" has to do with Myles's use of social media as a dramatic reconfiguration of assumptions concerning the confessional voice. Social media websites like Facebook and Instagram comprise a contemporary form of the 'non-place', a virtual meeting place or network where multiple influences and aesthetic conventions ('schools' of poetry among them), can intermingle and twist into new kinds of 'bodies' that unsettle received ideas about female embodiment, privacy, proper voicing and the like. What Myles's poetry helped me to identify, as a young female South African Indian poet, is that the 'non-place' was not a transcendent, out of body space. Rather, the 'non-place' could function in and of the body. The female body. *My* female body. Myles's poetry itself embodied a "non-phallogocentric way of thinking; secret, lateral, spreading". Her poetry had a vibrant presence on the internet – via her own website where links to her poetry can be read, listened to or watched – and she was active on social media such as YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. Her Instagram account currently has four thousand two hundred and twenty-eight followers to whom she has posted one thousand and seven hundred posts: photographs, snippets of news, pieces of text copied from the internet; parts of poems. Some of the pictures are random once-offs but she also posts picture series, deliberately blurry, rather than in focus. In addition, captioning some of these pictures are one liners, redolent of the briefest, passing poems: "Conrad", "pretty pussy bean" and "Shock sauce".

Myles's easy affinity with (and aptitude for) social media differed dramatically from Meena Alexander's more conventionalised, Romantic poetic voice, which I had begun to find somewhat remote from the demands and pleasures of being a woman in the twenty-first century. Myles has acclimated with the aesthetically ordinary online community, and is comfortable showcasing elements of her life on forums such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and SnapChat, and she has adapted these media to her purposes as a poet, working via various forms such as statuses, tweets, videos, vlogs, and pictures.

In order to illustrate, let me show a glimpse of Eileen Myles's Instagram project. Here is a snippet of her account:

Captioning Eileen

41 likes

2w

eileen.myles She was cool. We laughed
and joked about how I didn't like being
called ma'am

28 likes

2w

eileen.myles Call him ma'am. I'd like to be
called sir. he didn't even notice

50 likes

2w

eileen.myles She said here's your coffee
honey which I have to say ended things

The pictures associated with these captions seem to be taken in an airport, a site of the in-between, and transition. The first picture, blurred, depicts a woman laughing behind a counter. The second picture: a man who is absorbed in the laptop in front of him. In the last image: it's gone; deleted? Both the visual and the verbal elements, here, comprise a poem of encounter, looking, speaking, and passing. The woman (visual + verbal). The man (visual + verbal). Another woman (verbal: 'only' words). Myles places herself provisionally and relationally in between these strangers, consciously aware of her own sexual orientation, and as if playing with the parameters of their identity, and even sexual awareness. This is a brief encounter related to the "lesbian continuum", a place that is never fixed, but always mobile and in process, and which enables Myles to juxtapose little vignettes of self, others and socially normative gender conventions. It seems plausible for Myles to be using a social media application such as Instagram to further her poetry and her gender politics. In terms of poetic experimentalisms, it is relevant that Instagram allows followers of a user to comment or like posts. This is an interactive method, which is reminiscent of the forms of writerly community that early American experimental poets sought out amongst their female peers, in reaction to the limited masculinist parameters of so many well-established schools of poetry, the New York School among them (see Nelson 2007). Myles's Instagram account can give animated life to the figure 'Eileen Myles's as a poet with multiple socially-mediated embodiments. Myles does not dismiss a new media platform like Instagram as negative; she uses it as a multipurpose aesthetic space where poetry can perhaps find innovative forms, mobile and nomadic and beyond the conventional page.

Significantly, I found that Myles is unambiguous in claiming outrageous inspiration in her lover's female sexuality, and in using diction which thwarts the preferred expectations not only of the culture's established poetic register, but even of polite speech. She asserts the right of the words she chooses, their rightfulness in the place and context of her lesbian femaleness. This challenge to heteronormativity was revelatory to me. Consider an extract from another Myles's poem:

I always put my lover's pussy
in the middle of trees
like a waterfall
like a doorway to God
like a flock of birds.
I always put my lover's cunt
on the crest
of a wave
like a flag
that I can
pledge my
allegiance
to. This is my
country.

(Myles 1994: np)

Myles recasts what is considered 'natural' and 'unnatural' by placing ostensibly crude colloquial names amid the conventionally poetic beauties of nature (trees, waterfall, birds...). For her, the beloved's pussy defies description; her own imagination, seeking to do its alluring mysteries justice, must try one simile after another, all of them even too conventional. The meaning of this loved anatomy is elusive and deferred, despite what some might insist about simple crudity and obvious inappropriateness. Each image – trees, waterfall, birds, as natural analogies of this beautiful slit - open in the reader's mind as a startling insight into that which has more usually more screened, rendered taboo. Indeed, Myles goes so far as to equate "my lover's pussy" with the possibility of spiritual transcendence. Myles also delights in the obvious, almost schoolboy-ish pun (cunt/country), but even here she is purposeful in defying the more heroic, public claims of nationhood as an American's primary pledge of duty, power, and allegiance. Not for her the flag waving of patriotism; she would rather lose herself in a beloved's beloved female anatomy. Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic" is useful here in understanding the notion of erotic power.

Lorde defines erotic power as a potent female quality and advocates its use to her readers: “the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough” (1984: np). Myles exemplifies this in her poetry, in exaltation mode, even as the invocation of lesbian femaleness through disruptive references to iconic nature as well as iconic nationhood conjoins sensation with critical sensibility. Female embodiment (and lesbian affiliation) is thus changed from social shame to a celebratory glory *and* to an instrument of social critique that can debunk blinding platitudes. This too, this frank freeing up of the power to address taboo topics in poetry, helped me to recognise that the experimental, for a woman poet, might entail not only matters of unusual style or form, but a poet’s risky attention to content that some found dubious, and the use of a voice that refused the habitual polite tones.

As my own sense of ‘experimentalisms’ developed, becoming more prevalent as my manuscript progressed, I experimented with my femaleness, using different pronouns to write a self turned into provisional, projected ‘selves’. In “To Be Two”, Luce Irigaray rather provocatively suggests that singular identity is innately male and inimical to any female sense of self. She advocates that for women, “the particularities of the feminine world [comprise]... a more developed aptitude for relational life” (2001: np), and women, she suggests, are more likely to think of self in relation to another, not an ‘other’. She envisages female self as somehow holding two different subjects, neither considered first or second, these selves perpetually moving against and with each other. I have found this concept intriguing in exploring experimentalism in relation to self. I began to think beyond separate schools of poetry and beyond duality, towards the female multiples that could be said to reside within the generative ‘non-place’ of women’s experimental poetry. Yet, for innovative female poetry, I began to suspect that the idea of a doubled feminine identity, if initially intriguing, was also troublesome. Is the subject ‘herself/herselves’? Is ‘she’ so easily defined as both? Is ‘she’ both/and, not only doubled but re-doubled? What are the implications of expanded relationality for female poets and, furthermore, female experimental poets as they configure multiple, contradictory female subject positions in language? These questions escaped my answer.

But they did push me onwards to thinking beyond either Meena Alexander’s rhizomatic identity expressed in lyrical poems, and beyond Eileen Myles’s explicit experiment with content in exploring lesbian female embodiment in her poems...I began to wonder about a more overtly experimental poetics carried in the very language of poetry. In other words: was there a female affidamento figure, somewhere, who was practising a

linguistic experimentalism that could move my own writing forward? I understood that the very term ‘experimental’ was liable to provoke debate. Some ‘experimentalisms’ refer to the poet’s use of the page space in innovative ways. Some ‘experimentalisms’ are defined through a poet’s use of taboo subjects. Yet in terms of poetic histories, ‘experimentalism’ tends to conjure the kind of writing produced by the avant-garde Language poets, almost a precursor of poetic postmodernism. These poets aimed to deconstruct the ‘natural’ assumption of the individualised presence of the speaker behind the text, a speaker supposedly expressing a ‘self’ in language that was capable of such personal expression. Language poets often advocated an aleatory conceptual writing which recycled the linguistic detritus of many cultural forms, and disrupted poetic conventions of coherent, original ‘selfhood’. The forms of such poetry were varied – often there were poems that accentuated jarring, dislocated registers that refused to be reconciled into ‘meaning’; or poems which resembled chunks of prose, or poems which revealed the “farcical or unintelligible” (Reed 2014: 140) nature of language as a medium.

While it is not uncommon to hear Language writers berated as minor or dilettantish or self-indulgent by poets of overt political engagement and social representational poetics, it is important to recall that Language poetry (indeed *poetries*) “were concerned not so much with describing the world as with interrogating the possibilities of the social. The public nature of Language writing stands in direct contrast to the privacy of the [self-determining lyric]... poem and the therapeutic enabling of the individual...Language writing...seeks to understand how relations of power that inform the everyday are disseminated and veiled through language” (Vickery 2000: 6). With this attention to language as a densely opaque substance that evaded communicative meaning, the poems tended to demand a reader’s engagement with gaps and difficulties, rather than offering emotional, aesthetic or moral comfort, or epiphany. This writing, in destabilising ‘I’ as voice and identity, and so exposing the fictions of lyric’s expressive utterance, opens up the possibility of thinking through – and in relation to – the forms of ‘we’ that arise precisely because ‘I’ “must pass through the saturated social languages of race and gender, which overdetermine poetic expression” (Reed 2014:107).

Harryette Mullen: Risking Linguistic Experimentalism as a Black Woman

And so I came to meet my next affidamento, Harryette Mullen. She was brought to my attention by an academic mentor, who suggested I look up Mullen, and consider her poetry in relation to my own search for forms of experimental innovation that expressly evidenced

femaleness, and black femaleness in particular, via a linguistic turn. I remember misspelling this poet's first name in my work journal: 'Harriet'. I was inadvertently smoothing out difference, naturalising, Anglicising, whitening. But 'Harryette' was the node of difference I needed to learn to acknowledge, and allow. Difference is not a misspelling. Harryette Mullen's poetry works with and against the spell of language as medium. Looking for 'Harryette Mullen', I went to Google. As in my first encounter with Myles, I read the first Mullen poem that came up, in this case, "Sleeping with the Dictionary" (also the title of one of her collections):

...Retiring to the canopy of the bedroom, turning on the bedside light, taking the big dictionary to bed, clutching the unabridged bulk, heavy with the weight of all the meanings between these covers, smoothing the thin sheets, think with accented syllables ...Aroused by myriad possibilities, we try out the most perverse positions in the practice of our nightly act, the penetration of the denotative body of the work...

(2002: np)

I was out of my depth here. So I read. Interviews with Mullen. Articles about her poetry. I was uneasy about accepting Harryette Mullen as an affidavit, because her experimental impulse seemed the most foreign to me. I suddenly seemed to know so little. To need to discover so much more...

Mullen was born in Alabama but grew up and studied in Texas. She received her doctorate in 1990 (the same year I was born) graduating from the University of California, Santa Cruz. She has published eight collections of poetry and numerous critical essays and academic books, and is the recipient of the Gertrude Stein Award for innovative poetry. *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002) was a finalist for the National Book Award, National Book Critics Circle Award, and *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. Even with her commitment to the difficulties of linguistic experiment, she has been hailed (by some) as feminist for poetry that uses linguistic play and conceptual innovation to address topics such as mass culture and identity politics. I discovered, too, that her experimentalism is influenced by oral traditions, music and spoken word poetry; it is not an abstracted, disembodied 'Language poetry'. While she is a page poet, she treats the page as a site of performance. She "deconstructs the simple 'written/oral' binary" which falsely claims an opposition between singing and signing (see Zapf 2008:179), often electing not to represent blackness per se, but to materialise the idea of embodiment as cultural difference and encounter by enacting the differential, perplexing meeting of vernacular and other speech registers in her poems.

It was in particular the poem “Sleeping with the Dictionary” that turned me towards Mullen. I knew all too well the images she offers in this piece: “beside the bed, a pad lies open to record the meandering of migratory words”, being accustomed to writing at strange times myself. The dictionary became an allegory for the embodied act of writing, and the bringing into being of a female writerly self who meets and melds and makes, with others. What she describes is decadent and erotic. The body of poetry comes to Mullen’s body in bed, as if that process of writing poetry is also a sensual process of love-making. Mullen’s choice of phrasing is interesting. For example, she uses “meandering” instead of a word that might embody a more linear structure. The term is redolent of the rhizome and rhizomatic identity, and also a ghostly evocation of the dislocating ruptures of slave diaspora. As I see it, “Sleeping with the Dictionary” (and the collection with the same title) comprise a productive ‘non-place’ which enable Mullen to venture into the risky space, for a black female writer, of avant-garde experiment which reconfigures the expectations of black femaleness as victimhood, or pained embodiment, or primal substance. Harald Zapf (2008) points out, for instance, that Mullen’s poetry has only belatedly been claimed by the African-American canon; she was previously kept at the margins as an outsider who practices a culturally-suspicious linguistic-conceptual experimentalism that is ‘not black’ enough. Such a conflicted reception history appealed to me, a young female poet of colour who was attempting to write forms of race through recognisably ‘Indian’ cultural and experiential signifiers, but who was also, increasingly, drawn to odd, culturally and linguistically ‘homeless’ forms of poetic experiment that took overt place in language as site of experiment.

Further attractive to me were the shifts which marked Mullen’s writing. Her early work tended towards a coherent, expressive identity and depiction of self. As Zapf remarks, in Mullen’s early poetry, while she may mix English and Spanish into a ‘Spanglish’ that spoke to her particular Texan context, she was clearly aiming to create poems “of the self with an authentic voice, a romantic, unitary and expressive ‘I’ “ (Zapf 2008: 178). However, as her inclination towards poetic innovative increased, she began to use a poetics of fragmented selving, carried in disruptive language and jarring conceptual form. Mullen “began to problematize the speaking subject in more radical ways”, apparently becoming “less interested in representing” self and experience than in “enacting” an experimentally performative meta-awareness of the black female poet working in and against language as possibility and limit (Zapf 2008:179). The experimental poet Myung Mi Kim aids me in understanding Mullen’s poetry, and in writing my own overt linguistic experimentalism (See

“House Yard Tree” in Chapter 5.) Kim considers that innovative “poetry invites a practice of language/perception that embraces mutability, undecidability, the motion underneath and around what's codified in conventions of language, grammar, syntax, semantics, and so forth” (Keller 2008: 355).

Jessica Luck suggests that Mullen's is a “post-Language poetics” that entails a layered “nomadic consciousness” which eludes easy categorisation. It resembles “the intricate honeycombs of an individual beehive, the multi-user construction of digital information such as Wikipedia, or the movement of a school of fish or a flock of birds” (2008: 361). Such analogies (blurring natural organicism and the technological ‘hive’) describe Mullen's mix of conceptual and experiential subject matters and her diverse, cross-genre style; hers is a poetics which complicates simplistic assumptions of ‘black writing’ as necessarily *counter*-cultural identity politics. It staggers feminisms, postcolonialisms, and revisions of popular culture within the performative spaces of attention to language. Mullen does not cast aside the ‘I’ but she “conspicuously puts... ‘I’ under erasure”, willing herself to write beyond “the ‘I’ [that] is the beloved lyrical voice” (Luck 2006: 357) and into mobile spaces where blackness, femaleness, and ‘poetness’ take disjunctive forms. If “Mullen rejects an authoritative ‘voice’ as the foundation of her poetry,” she nevertheless locates “the art of experimental poetry” as important “to the poet's identity” and cultural voicing (Luck 2006: 380). The ‘I’ of her poetry is conditional because her ‘I’, as black and as female, has been constantly placed under erasure: by white racist culture; by white and black forms of patriarchy; by black politics’ preference for directly representing the materiality of the suffering or powerful black body. Mullen's own bodied black ‘I’, in response, seeks a paradoxical space of experimental difference, even as it wishes to assert the right to experiential ‘I’ness. For Cathy Park Hong, this is perfectly explicable: Hong rebukes the poetic avant-garde's “delusion of whiteness”; its “specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian, when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like *voice* to alter conditions forged in history” (no date, or page). Put simply, Mullen must and must not efface the ‘I’. If one of the precepts of Language poetry, almost a cardinal principle, is to dump the supposedly outmoded baggage of the lyric ‘I’ and to write through a melee of received consumer mediated discourses, Mullen's material position as an African American female has already entailed the social denial of self, the marginalisation of access to self, and the I's inscription as embedded in a categorical racial-gendered collective that is defined as intrinsically different from the model of a mainstream status quo founded (as if naturally) upon preferential ideals

of white, privileged masculinity. The result, then, is that a reader should not expect Mullen completely to disregard 'I'; she might be inclined to claim it, assert it.

It is the uncertain duality of the subjectivity of occupying the in-between space of lyric and language that Luck implies in calling Mullen's a "Post-Language poetics". To this end, as well, I find in Mullen's poetry an embodied femaleness, the poet recognising that "using the body as an instrument is a kind of feminine strategy" (Frost 2000: 412) that links to what it means to live materially in a particular kind of body, a materiality that is mediated by *language* as much as by biological attributes. As Luck suggests, "Words are not abstract entities for Mullen; they have heft and flesh" (2006: 376), a visceral materiality which subverts the abstract conceptualism which informs much Language poetry and poetry of the avant-garde. In this move, Mullen creates an innovative language poetry post Language poetry, exploring the possible emplacement of female embodiment, rather than its effacement. This experimental writing through the female body is described by Luck as "an alternative poetics" (2006: 359), and has assisted me in coming to understand the complex forms which experimentalism may take, in writing by a woman of colour. With Mullen as an affidavit, I became increasingly interested in creating poetry which was nomadic and mobile in terms of unusual (re)alignments of gender and genre. As Mullen implies in "Exploring the Dark Continent", poetry should not be viewed as a fixed site:

This dream is not a map
A poem is not the territory.

The dreamer reclines in a barbershop
carpeted with Afro turf.
In the dark some soul yells.

It hurts to walk barefoot
on cowrie shells.

The process of writing experimental poetry is difficult, painful. Where am 'I'? And who? It is sometimes a bizarre, a surreal dreamscape. For a female experimental poet, the embodied challenge is perhaps even greater: no conventional barbershop community for her, where the culturally-confident male self in the masculine body is being groomed in the hands of an accomplished male familiar. The black female experimental poet must risk venturing into new, undefined spaces, where the poem is no clear space, where 'I' is so vulnerable it may not even be visible or expressed, and where the strange practice of this reworking of language

– ‘Afro turf’, not ‘astro turf’ – is not necessarily recognised or valued, despite the haunting intimation of some lost original connection in a wounded, dark vessel of history...

This can be said to be echoed in “Sleeping with the Dictionary” where the speaker writes on “a pad [that] lies open to record the meandering of migratory words”. Mullen’s poetry has the feature of “nomadic consciousness” in language, through its awareness of linguistic plasticity and its relation to identity. Luck stresses this movement of language, the ever-changing of position and situation suggesting that Mullen’s poetics is “a beautifully fluctuant and multiplicitous entity” (2006: 379), held momentarily in place and pattern. This idea is attractive to me. As I developed as a poet, my own writing was taking similarly mobile forms. Thus, although Mullen’s poetry forms many complexities and oddities, it is an excellent model in viewing the practice of experimenting as a woman poet. The ‘I am’ does not necessarily have to come up first. It can hide behind the line or not exist in a poem entirely. If I called Mullen foreign, at first, it was really the “I under erasure” that was foreign to me. But I only understood what that meant when reading her poem, “Any Lit” (which I quote in part, below):

You are a ubiquity beyond my minority
 You are a eunuch beyond my migraine
 You are a Eurodollar beyond my miserliness
 You are a urinal beyond my Midol
 You are a uselessness beyond my myopia

(2002: np)

Mullen’s poetry certainly relates to Braidotti’s concepts of “rhizomatic identity” and “nomadic consciousness” through its Wikipedia-like texture and honeycomb systems. This is a contemporary inflection of the mobilities of form, idea and experience which my own poetry is interested in addressing. This is a poetry writing as a notational process, although sometimes self-expressive, working through accretion and sedimentation of material. As Kim says, “Poems are continually under construction” (qtd in Keller 2008:356). So too can I suggest that Mullen’s femaleness is also “under construction”, a performative experimental act refracted into the materiality of the poet’s writing. Another idea from Kim is suggestive here as concerns both Mullen’s and my own poetics.

Language is on the roam, as particles of sound, as unmoored
 particles of meanings. And the way that they congregate and
 call to each other, follow in and reformulate, is a way of

being in the world, is a way of being in attendance.

(Keller 2008: 356)

The implication is that language holds materiality in our bodies. As Luck ponders, in her article on Mullen's writing: "In her nightly habitual act, is the poet awake or asleep? Stimulated or sedated? Conscious or unconscious? Mullen's answer seems to be, all of the above" (2006: 377). And: "Mullen reminds us that writing a poem is a fully embodied event, something that happens to her, as well as something that she does" (Luck 2006: 380). Similarly, as I wrote, my female body was in attendance.

In light of my "affidamento" figures, I begin to understand my 'experimental' not merely as form or style but as an embodied process of critical-imaginative enquiry and engagement which enables me to tackle complex, mobile affinities of place, person and belonging. I become less interested in claiming singular, formalised categorisation, and more intrigued to acknowledge the necessarily provisional, contingent nature of the claims upon my writing. It has been extremely useful to engage in a process of ongoing reflection about questions of poetic relation, thinking these through both as 'relay', moving from one poet on to another, and yet also as more erratic moments of connection. Howevermuch I have hoped to make clear and explicit in this chapter, for example, regarding poetic influences, there remain arcs, scribbles, loops...passings invisibly traced, as my ideas and writing move. Meena Alexander. Eileen Myles. Harryette Mullen. These poets are "affidamento" figurations who have enabled me to conceptualise my own work. In seeking to know 'what' kind of poetry I was writing, I found "a site of unnamings" (Keller 2008: 338). For each of my "affidamento" poets, some form of innovative claim took hold upon my imagination inviting me to move into and then beyond certain spaces of identity and poetic practice. For Meena Alexander, it was "how dark I looked, unmistakably Indian" which helped me to see poetry as a "place that we locate ourselves, work ourselves in relation with others"; indeed, that "it is in place" understood *as poetry* "that we survive" (2013: np). When it came to my responding to the poetry of Eileen Myles, her sexuality and gender difference became a means to let the poems "receive" me, so that they could become "the container which the poet holds out as spectacle, offering, declaration and potential agent of change" (Nelson2014: np) And with Harryette Mullen, the process involved in 'experimentalisms' and a "Post-Language poetics" coaxed me to understand the need to leave the poetry itself to reside "in the space of the 'unpositioned'" (Keller 2008: 352).

Chapter Three: The Gurlesque

Emergence

In their edited anthology *Gurlesque: the New Grrly, Grotesque, Burlesque Poetics* (2001), Arielle Greenberg and Lara Glenum curate the work of young, contemporary North American female poets under the banner of ‘the Gurlesque’. They identify ‘the Gurlesque’ as an iconoclastic form of female poetics that surged into prominence in the early part of the twenty first century (2001: 1). Both editors write a short essay exploring the Gurlesque, attempting to give currency to the term as a descriptor of an innovative new kind of poetry by young women, a poetry marked by an apparently confounding feminine-feminist “irreverence, capacity for irony, suspicion of sincerity, and ethical backbone” in relation to representations of ‘femaleness’ (Fischer 2011: np). The poetry was interested in exploring the links between innovation as both experiential subject matter *and* as conceptual-stylistic newness in ‘gurliness’.

Sometimes I don't feel happy unless I'm in my clown suit. And I enjoy hitting people on the head with a foam club. I really do...

When people see me they realize that it looks very sophisticated to wear a clown suit and smoke a cigarette. This is how I get all the ladies because they think I'm very droll.

People don't understand how you turn into a clown. You turn into a clown because you feel more and more like putting on a clown suit. When you're around people you sense a kindliness. It makes you so nervous you can't stay calm. Which is why it feels perfectly normal to wear orange pants.

Plus, it's very subversive to wear bow ties. You can't imagine how jolly everything is. And the fright wigs... I don't want to be a clown but I'm sure to be one. My mother was a clown.

(Excerpt from “Clown” Minnis 2007: np)

Greenberg credits herself for creating the term ‘gurlesque’,^{vii} first using it when she wrote a review of Chelsey Minnis’s poetry collection *Zirconia* (2001). Engaging with *Zirconia*, she found herself thinking that Minnis’s poems exemplified a broader phenomenon in poetry by her female peers, one not “limited to this work or this author, because this particular brand of sensuality/ sentimentality at work here is one that I believe is in the zeitgeist: a ‘gurlesque’ aesthetic, a feminine, feminist incorporating of the grotesque and cruel with the spangled and

dreamy”. As Amanda Montel explains in “Powerful, Pithy, Political Poetry”, “[e]xamining everything from Hello Kitty culture to what happens in our bedrooms”, Gurlesque poems “devilishly expose the complex interior space inhabited by women today, showing the inextricable relationship between constructed femininity and feminism. All the while, the writers poke fun at girly commodity culture by embracing both the glittery and glum aspects of our everyday lives” (2011: np). Poems which incline towards the Gurlesque often “dwell[] in the bodily and draw[] attention to it” (Fischer: np), working to bring together “aesthetic contexts of adornment and display” with “contexts that bear complex relations to norms for women in the culture at large” (Fischer 2011: np). Many of the poems in the *Gurlesque* anthology entail “brash invention and linguistic verve”, prompted by a “younger feminism [that] derives its gusto from an erotics of talk – sharp-tongued and quick-witted forays into sexual politics, the terms negotiated not in the boardroom but the bed” (Fischer 2011: np).

In terms of “emerging tendencies” and female agency, Glenum remarks how she and Greenberg “about a decade ago” began to notice in the writing of young female poets “the inclination to use high artifice and formal exaggeration to unsettle gender norms, often by toying with the male gaze” (King 2010, comment thread).

Mark Wallace’s comments on the eclectic nature of the anthology point to the *varied* forms which even an identifiable Gurlesque inclination may take: “*Gurlesque* is without doubt a hybrid anthology, making no significant distinctions between those writers whose work draws more on the history of avant-garde poetics, or confessionalism, or from backgrounds in narrative prose”. In other words, a reader should not expect a *single* formal style or poetic mode. Indeed, the varied modes could be considered a strength of ‘the Gurlesque’, a space in which an unevenly shared set of intersecting and yet individually-materialised poetic concerns gives complex shape to Gurlesque poetics, refusing reductive simplification. As would come to be said of poet Patricia Lockwood’s 2017 prose memoir *Priestdaddy*, many poems that were considered to exhibit a Gurlesque quality had a “mixture of personal confession and political confrontation” (Smith 2017:np) that engaged with young female lives, in registers variously sardonic, ingenuous, conceptual, and/or comic. Wallace additionally notes that “Much of the work also collapses distinctions between high, low and pop culture and art, while other pieces undermine distinctions between poetry and prose, or poetry and drama” (2010: np). This, too, is important. The blurring of cultural and generic categories is connected perhaps to an insistence on the expansive rather than narrow nature of ‘the Gurlesque’, and manifests the need, among these young female poets, to write beyond conventional constraints. In a sense, then, Gurlesque poems may be considered as

explorations of a potentially transgressive ‘intersectional’ impulse, in that they draw widely on a “set of cultural referents” (Darcy 2015: 3) usually imagined to be uncomfortable bedfellows: pop culture, the literary, and feminism. Lara Glenum goes so far, in theorising a Gurlesque, to suggest that a poet like Chelsea Minnis forges a “new zone of consciousness, which is the poem itself”, and that this occurs “through sheer stylistic over determination”. In theoretical terms, when a text is understood as being overdetermined, we understand (via Louis Althusser) that it is to be thought about through multiple impulses held in tension, without these being merely contradictory.

In keeping with my own preferred foci in this section, working with ideas from Greenberg, Glenum and others, I will suggest that a Gurlesque impulse works creatively in the service of an assertively female experimental poetics that is on the rise among young women poets. The experimentalism is premised on airing strikingly risqué subject matter in registers that upset either polite or earnest conventions of lyric experiential expression, instead pushing these up against a self-aware, often humorously ironic display of language and linguistically-received categories as game possibility even within contexts of powerful but chafing social limit. Further (much as Barrett Watten argues for Language writing more broadly, as well as for varieties of poetry that draw on Language poetics, despite Language writing having itself been subject to critique as elitist esoteric dilettantism), my chapter hopes to demonstrate that a Gurlesque poetics is not merely trite aesthetics in toying with middle class femininities and playing around with formal poetic procedures and rebellious registers. Rather, in the long, conflicted wake of first, second and now third wave feminisms, it is a poetics in-formation, answering to a zeitgeist that at once foregrounds femaleness as commodity and touts women’s free-spirited liberty, and yet continues to compromise female agency. Second Wave feminist interventions have led to political and cultural gains for women, so that many now “have the privilege to be more playful with and brash about their relationship to the markers of traditional femininity, as well as to sexuality”. Third Wave feminism enables a focus “on sexual agency and pleasure...considering the opportunity for agency and pleasure through consensually playing with, upending, and subverting traditional notions of beauty and power” (Greenberg 2013:15). In the process, Third Wave feminism destabilises “the binary “of trauma/empowerment”, moving uncertainly “towards something darker and stickier, in which there might be the possibility for authentic pleasure within something previously considered to be an unwanted feminine ‘trapping’...and/or displeasure in something previously considered to be empowering” (Greenberg 2013:15). The Gurlesque

poetry, written by young (“*younger* American women poets” [Greenberg 2013:15]) inclines in terms of subject matter and stylistics towards a Third Wave feminist paradigm.

As will become clear, a Gurlesque poetics works from within a given contemporary frame of metropolitan urban femaleness, claiming and rejecting, adopting and adapting elements of the entangled convolutions which contemporary femaleness entails in multiple contexts. A Gurlesque poetics is especially interested in re-coding the lack of power accorded to youthful femaleness. With an “interest in the category of girlishness, the girly, and girlhood, and the ways in which these notions are problematised by Third Wave feminist poetics”, the Gurlesque “tends to ‘upend the long-standing category of girl-as-victim’, or girl-self as locus of violation, of shame, of abuse, of guilt, (Greenberg 2013:15). Of course, the point is not to deny that girls often *are* the victims of sexual violence and patriarchal oppression, but Gurlesque seeks to find complex understandings, acknowledging that ‘girl’ is a:

particularly fraught subject position laden with myth, fantasy, glamour, danger, fragility, mortality, immortality, sexuality and wholesomeness; and as a category both marginalized and wonderfully realized in literature – comes to stand in for a wealth of ‘gender trouble’ (to borrow from Judith Butler)

(Greenberg 2013:15)

Additionally, impelled by Third Wave feminist forms of agency, a Gurlesque is interested in skewing the traditional adherence to an “axis of desire...in which female or girl is defined in relation to and dependent on male or boy”, where “the feminine is the other, the subordinate, the lack of masculine” (Greenberg 2013:16). A Gurlesque poetics troubles ideas of female sexuality as directed towards male pleasure, where ‘female’ is often marked by “an internalized misogyny” and self-loathing, and as if by necessity “has an allegiance to an upwardly mobile, upper-middle class vision of traditional domestic bliss: a man by her side, giving her life purpose and vision” (Greenberg 2013:17).

In this section, I will attempt to chart something of the tangled features of the Gurlesque, exploring the ways in which it inventively mixes and converges various influential aesthetic predecessors and influencers. As Wallace notes, both Greenberg’s and Glenum’s essays in the *Gurlesque* anthology “find many historical and literary sources for the development of the Gurlesque approach, suggesting not so much an absolute break with the past as an intensification of some key concerns that more widely asserted themselves in the 1990s” (2010). I will focus on several key practices, concepts or impulses which inform

the Gurlesque, notably Riot Grrrls, the Burlesque, the (female) Grotesque, Camp, and Girly Kitsch. (The list is of course not comprehensive, and other scholars might wish to explore the influence of female performance artists, Dada, or even perhaps Dolly Parton, on the formation of a Gurlesque poetics.) I select particular conceptual-“theoretical tangents germane to Gurlesque poetics”, as Glenum sees it, also contextualising in relation to forms such as girlzines, and to theories of the performative. At strategic points I illustrate my discussion with reference to selected poems. This has proven a more useful method, given the emergent nature of a Gurlesque poetics, than committing my study to a series of chapters based on notable practitioners of a Gurlesque, although en route some names recur, among them Chelsey Minnis, Ariana Reines and Patricia Lockwood.

In capitalizing terms and currents – Camp rather than ‘camp’, for instance – I follow the practice of the Greenberg and Glenum volume in order to draw attention to these features as notable identifying elements of ‘the Gurlesque’. However, the underlying purpose is *not* to reify the categories into fixed terms, a rigidity which would refuse the *variance* of gurlesque possibilities and manifestations. As will be seen in this chapter, my argument is based on Gurlesque as a loose sphere of analysis, one which can be used for exploratory analysis rather than definitional categorization. A reader will see, for instance, that in commenting on Gurlesque, the editors of the original anthology sometimes use the definite article, ‘the’, and at others the indefinite ‘a’. Sometimes, too, the inclination is to omit an article at all, referring simply to ‘Gurlesque’. I follow a similarly fluid method of naming, so as deliberately to signal a process constantly in-formation, rather than a category designating evidentiary fixity.

In the very term ‘Gurlesque’ are aural nods to ‘Grrrl’ movements, to the ‘Burlesque’, and to the Grotesque. These echoic connections are worth exploring, as they offer us a series of orientations or conceptual-experiential framings of this burgeoning yet eclectic aesthetic. Even a cursory tracking of these lineages will serve to remind us of the powerfully paradoxical nature of the Gurlesque, its capacity, in the work of different young female poets, to bring together in the same poetic space agentively aggravated impulses of a feminine and a feminist female agency. (The anthology “spotlights some of the best feminine/feminist poems of the past decade, by Catherine Wagner, Chelsey Minnis, Sarah Vap, Cathy Park Hong, Brenda Coultas and others” [Montel 2011: np].) In addition, this tracking will help us – very provisionally – to locate Gurlesque aesthetics in relation to feminist thinking, and theories of gender performativity. This tentative attempt to contribute to the creation of a critical language of the Gurlesque is important, for “poems can only mean as much as the discourse[s]” through which a culture of critical response “gives them attention” (Middleton

in Hampson and Barry 1993, 192). Like many forms of female experimental creative practices, a Gurlesque runs the risk of disappearing, in contexts which are not amenable to the innovative, and which marginalize forms that push against comfortably established boundaries.

For the moment, let me consider a little more finely how the Gurlesque emerged as a feature in poetry by contemporary young female writers in the United States. In a nonchalantly iconoclastic rather than scholarly register (no doubt meant to signal a form of ‘cultural cred’ that characterizes the popular referents of much Gurlesque poetry) Greenberg asserts that “for some of these writers” in the anthology, “the Gurlesque is just a tendency that occasionally crops up. Some did it more in their early stuff. Some are doing it more later. Some only do it now and then. Some are 24/7 Gurlesque rockers”. Ailbhe Darcy (2014:1), similarly, refers to the Gurlesque as a “field”, implying loose range rather than tick-box consistency. She also remarks “the double vision of the Gurlesque” (1) which offers scope for poetry that does not unproblematically ‘legitimate’ femaleness and forms of female embodiment, but entails productive tensions: a Gurlesque poem may be at one and the same time “spectacular” and “moving”, “darkly funny” and yet complex in its evocation of individual’s relationships to influential social issues. Such a poem may be marked by swagger and speculation and sensation, tendencies which do not resolve into either/or, and which refuse to cancel each other out. As in Molloy’s poems, we may find (as does Darcy), a riotous mix of tenderness, flamboyance, the endearing; of manhandling, “brisk fondness” (2), “grotesque melodrama” (2), and “the artful embrace of excess” (3). (Formally, too, while much Gurlesque poetry is visibly experimental in its use of the page – breaking boundaries, occupying and shifting margins – note that there are writers of the Gurlesque who use more conventional poetic forms, such as the villanelle. The point, here, is to remind us that experimentalisms need not announce or declare themselves in any singular form; a scholar working on questions of innovation in contemporary women’s poetry needs to appreciate that even forms of poetic ‘tradition’ can acquire vital new life and flexible latitude when re-cast in a different context of thought and creation, such as ‘the Gurlesque’.)

In its uneasy yet alluring combination of feminist and feminine; of stylistic lushness, sentimental imagining, knowing display and even rapacious sexual agency, Greenberg draws readers’ attention to the fact that ‘the Gurlesque’ is something of a “sideshow stage” which she and Glenum have put together in their efforts to discover a new angle from which to engage the contemporary poetry scene; the category does not mean that poet X or poet Y herself identifies ‘as Gurlesque’; rather, that as editors they have speculatively discerned in

this variety of poetry by varied women writers “a tendency” (2001: 3). As a point of reference, consider Chelsey Minnis’s “Wench” illustrative of a Gurlesque tendency. This is a poem which Fischer cites as being “emblematic of the [*Gurlesque*] collection” (2011:np). The poem begins with a wry wishfulfilment in which the speaker invokes for her best hopes a sweetly apt mode of female dress and behaviour: “I want to wear fluted sleeves and become like a darling person with appropriateness all around me”. However, as the all-round cloying ‘appropriateness’ might lead us to suspect, along with the metaphoric analogy yet inevitably *never* possible reality conveyed via the synonym ‘like’, this desire is intuited by the speaker to be unrealisable, even *undesirable*. She offers an abrupt counter-take, a corrective:

I should be thought of as a fiend. But I am a strumpet or an
abyss. Like a groove, like azure. I am a wench like azure.
This is what a girl thinks when she is jumping rope.

It is rough to be a seafoam wench. Like cocksucker. Like
kissing someone and then spitting into their mouth.

The poem shocks, in its crude sexualised imagery, but is also creatively clever in its subversions. The poet has her speaker express one desire, and then immediately has her understand that even this ideal femaleness would be found socially wanting, stripped bare as some perverse *inappropriateness* however closely the speaker seemed to meet the expectations. Even in behaving as expected, she would incur horrified criticism, being seen as a ‘fiend’. The poem then very purposefully (with a sardonic, devilish cunning) turns this fiendish appellation into a valorised self-assertion of supposedly tainted femaleness, summoning and appropriating the sexually-denigrating term, ‘strumpet’, and then, without allowing the term its habitual categorical force, almost immediately knocking the slur onwards, into the unexpected: a reader jolts from fiend to strumpet to abyss to groove to wench to azure. The sexual innuendos have an energising natural force, and the poem proceeds through a relentlessly disorientating velocity that refuses to stay appropriately in place. Innocent girl children. Skipping. And yet into this imaginative experiential environment the poet allows the disturbingly sexual, in both language and action. Who can ever know, she seems to be provoking a reader to understand, what a ‘girl’ is, and what behaviours and thoughts are ‘right’ for girls, and ‘rightly’ associated with girlhood. Girl. Say it often enough and the word becomes estranged. Grl. Grrrl. Growl. Playful, and yet po(e)tent. The very skipping action of jumping rope, a repetitive up and down that ties one in, yet with a fast, loose fluency of movement and capability, the body fully involved in the

motion for fear of being tripped up and out, jumps the ideas of the poem here and there; again and again. Significantly, the poet's chosen terms *may* connect to 'girl' in that they may emanate from a girl child's playful unconscious, or from a deeper sociohistorical unconscious which seeks to define femaleness as fiendish, as morally louche, as fearful abyss, as sexually 'grooved'. Thus, the ideas may, if a reader so wishes, be coaxed into some coherence, as it were straining to 'describe' a cluster of associations and physical biologies indicative of femaleness. But even these willed or apparent coherences can disappear into the blue yonder, into the azure, a poetically beautiful hyperbolically exquisite blue space of spectacular imaginative richness, indeed an always-deferred *infinity* that eludes categorical definition. This is a blue so beyond an impoverished banal defined as 'female' that it becomes a future female beyond girlhood invested with the magical power of 'azure' (not to mention the improvised variations of 'the blues'.) What 'wench' is this, the title goads, if this is her powerful realm and attractive allure? What grown woman, by analogy, would not want to re-harness for herself this vast azure of possibility, suggestive of some ideal time before borders of gender and gendered behaviour had been fully set, firmly fixed, dutifully determined? As Fischer remarks in a review, a Gurlisque poetics "has one hand in the grotesque (an expectorated insult, a sex act as slur), the other in the *azure* (the aesthetically lush), all of it envisioned from within a youthful, feminine subjectivity.... It is poems like 'Wench' that best exemplify Greenberg's assertion that 'Clitoral (instead of seminal) to the Gurlisque is Playing with (Fucking with) the Girly'" (King 2010: np).

Gurlisque poets speak explicitly of the experience of being female, dealing with taboo and disruptive subjects in strategic, strange disjuncture with aspects of femaleness that have been culturally naturalised, and indeed commodified. The Glenum and Greenberg anthology which gathers together material by writers who seem to exemplify this nascent 'something' which the editors elect to call the Gurlisque "collapses distinctions between high, low and pop culture and art, while other pieces undermine distinctions between poetry and prose, or poetry and drama" (Wallace 2010:np). As I hope to show in this chapter, such a vital confluence of forces *energises* Gurlisque poems, and enables them to live in spaces both academic and ordinary. To my mind, Gurlisque as a cultural impulse gives the lie to anxieties that "contemporary culture habitually designates for 'the poet' a facile place, where s/he is almost a cocktail party entertainer, rather than a cultural mediator whose work is marked by intellect - a dirty word, it seems, like 'difficulty'" (Rasula 2004: 19-20). The Gurlisque poets acknowledge the potential cultural limit of 'the poet' head-on in electing catchy, outrageous

subject matters; many Gurlesque poets write poems which demonstrate that to entertain can *also* entail ‘entertaining’ ideas, bringing heart and head into an uneasy conjoined space which prompts pleasure and questioning. A question of pleasure; a pleasurable questioning.

In *Gurlesque*, Greenberg and Glenum provide selections of material from poets located in the United States, a context in which the commodification of femaleness has been prevalent, and a provocation to cultural theorists of female identity. Much of the poetry in the anthology “hinges on the idea of self and identity and language as performance rather than essence”, and explores the tactic of “hyperbole” through which the poetry “seeks to break out of notions of proper behavior and language through which American women’s lives and writing still often remain closely guarded” (Wallace 2010: np). Despite the American identification of the poets in the anthology, however, the editors suggest that the Gurlesque tendency is not limited to this country. To me, this is a significant part of the appeal of the Gurlesque as a concept-in-form. Irish poet and academic Aibhe Darcy notes, in her article “Dorothy Molloy’s Gurlesque Poetics”, that Greenberg and Glenum “are careful to say that they are not documenting a school but indicating a phenomenon, and their framework has already lent itself to transnational readings” (2014: 3). In Darcy’s article, for example, she explores Irish poet Dorothy Molloy’s poetics as possibly Gurlesque emphasizing that Molloy’s poetry draws on Gurlesque features but that the powerful American popular culture frame of reference has been “exchanged for alternative” but similarly potent “sets of cultural referents” linked to religion (2014: 3). In the case of Molloy’s poetry, Darcy suggests that the poet subverts those Catholic cultural codes and conventions which have been so important in mediating the lives of Irish women, and ‘Irish identity’. Darcy argues this shift in frame does not preclude Molloy’s poetry from being Gurlesque. In Molloy’s verse, the more familiar United States repertoire of ‘the Gurlesque’ – which Darcy cites as “the trappings of post-punk American teen consumerism” and “the shorthand of Hello Kitty, glitter and anorexia” (2014:4) - are “exchanged for alternative cultural referents” (Darcy 2014:4). Such an exchange, though, does not empty the poems of their evidently Gurlesque features: “a camped-up performance of hyper femme feminism, lush with verbal music and kitsch imagery, which combines the common atmosphere of the early burlesque with a disturbingly violent sexuality” (2014: 3). One of my interests, as this chapter develops, will be to engage, from my own specific, twenty-first-century South African context, the established markers used to identify a Gurlesque poem or poet, considering how a Gurlesque tendency may be

inflected by geographical and temporal location, and a particular poet's cultural habitus and identification.

In the following section, I will provisionally and tentatively unpack *some* of the key cultural affiliations and styles that Greenberg and Glenum themselves consider to have exerted an ambient shaping of Gurlesque tendencies. My comments are certainly not comprehensive; I offer a few selected exploratory gestures. Overall, I hope to enable readers of contemporary poetry by young women to consider such writing in the light of a 'Gurlesque' that is itself a poetics which needs to be understood as part of an expanded aesthetic repertoire of concepts and cultural practices.^{viii} If my own study is very preliminary, and points to the links between a Gurlesque and contexts of influence and understanding such as 'grrrl', 'camp' and 'burlesque', for example, it is to be hoped that subsequent scholars will further enlarge our understanding of a Gurlesque poetics as being located in relation to complex aesthetic lineages, and impulses.

Girlhood Studies

For scholars interested in understanding Gurlesque poetics, it is intriguing to remark the rise, in literary-cultural scholarship, of the internationalising field of critical girlhood studies, which coincides with the rise of a Gurlesque poetic interest. "Since the 1990s, the development of girlhood studies has emphasised the powerful girl, challenging earlier limits for a girl's behaviour known as the core paradigm" of literature written for girls. "Girlhood studies discuss the girl in the light of theories of monstrosity and queer", for example. 'The Girl' as a life being and girlhood as a life phase are "considered...strange and twisted, simultaneously grotesque and gurlesque" (Österholm 2016: 29). This entails, as in a Gurlesque, "a feminine, feminist incorporating of the grotesque and cruel with the spangled and dreamy"; it mixes "sensuality/sentimentality" (Greenberg 2010: 2). Note here the deliberate *slash*. Far from indicating indecision, or the easy substitutability of one term for another, and either/or, the slash effects a clever conceptual violence. It very forcefully insists on compounding conceptual discomfort, rather than opting for the slightly more familiar, conventional 'link-lack' which a hyphen implies. Such apparently passing tactics can help us to imagine the disruptive energies of a Gurlesque poetics.

When viewed through the lens of critical girlhood studies, scholarship on 'the girl' is clearly relevant to an understanding of an emergent Gurlesque poetics. Kimberly Lamm remarks that while girls in contemporary capitalist culture "have an unprecedented cultural

visibility” what is less “visible, however, is the fact that the *figure* [my italics] of the girl is made to perform various forms of symbolic work that for the most part goes unquestioned”. In the field of contemporary innovative poetry by young women writers, I believe, a Gurllesque poetics undertakes such querying, “[r]egistering the crucial difference – often elided and difficult to see – between actual girls and the work the figure of the girl is expected to perform (Lamm 2015: 111). Lamm explains that ‘the girl’, configured as “unreflectively participating in the terms of recognition of the cultures of capitalism” tends to be used as a diagnostic tool which merely attests to the tentacular reach of “capitalist saturation”. Varieties of such ‘girlness’ abound, and “girl pop stars who put their femininity on display are easy and quite satisfying targets”. By:

making girls emblems of capitalism’s superfluous damage, you can very effectively reinforce the idea that everything that matters – history, politics, and even value itself – has been dumbed down and diluted. This rhetorical move has a long and entrenched history. Except in feminist studies of media and mass culture (and sometimes not even there) what Heather Warren-Crow identifies as ‘girlphobic’ conflation of the girl and commodification are hardly ever questioned

(Lamm 2015:112)

This means, for example, that instead of *critically reflecting* on the ways in which commodity culture has used the contradictory varieties of youthful femaleness associated with girl - girlness, girlishness, girl bodies, girl fears, girl power and girl desires... - as potentially slippery exchange objects, what we have is primarily a tautological girlphobic argument in which ‘the girl’ as developmental female is paradoxically burdened with reproducing consumer culture even as this figure of ‘the girl’ is at the same dismissed as tainted and diminished, by proxy, because she emblematises and embodies the banality, superficiality and relentless consumer desire via which capitalism proliferates (Lamm 2015: 112). Gurllesque poets, as I see their work, problematise this expediently neat conceptual-representational bind; their poems are interested in applying pressure to the incongruities evident in received caches of ideas. If the results, in the poems, can be discomforting, perverse, outspoken, presenting readers with forms of disobedient youthful femaleness which up the ante by re-using, suing, soothing, strewing The Culture’s own versions of ‘girl’ into a fugacious feminist-feminine ‘gurl’, then this is part of a Gurllesque’s innovative authority in exploring the often contrary possibilities and constraints for figuring the lives of youthful femaleness from *within* contemporary culture. Pretty power. Petty power. Pity power. Putti power. Putta power. Pretty powerful.

The poems play into, off and against rampant cultural anxieties around girls: as malleable, passive, impressionable, childlike, easy dupes of neo-liberal commodification, and as future desiring machines whose bodies and dreams morph into slutty tricksters able to slip in and out of the baffling battery of patriarchal norms. In so doing, the poems become spaces of volatile embodiment, productive spaces of poetic action in which ‘the girl’ manifests not as either this, *or* that, but through linguistic-metaphoric strategies of “layering, simultaneity, fluctuation, nonlinear density” that are influenced by a feminist psychology which conceives of female subjectivity as potentially *unpredictable* (Kolbowski 1990:141), “complicated imbrications of the categories of girl and woman” (Lamm 2015: 113). In terms of a Gurlesque poetics, for example, Ariana Reines suggests that one significant element of ‘the girl’s’ cultural labour is supposedly to “mak[e] herself into a frozen and transparent vehicle for others’ words and desires”, and it is this very work that her “own poetry eloquently struggles with and resists” (Lamm 2015: 120). Critical girlhood studies provides an instructive frame through which to view a Gurlesque poetics as a powerful literary-rhetorical strategy. One example that will help to make this clear is intersections between Gurlesque and *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, a book-length manifesto composed by the neo-Situationist Franco-Italian collective Tiqqun, published by Semiotext(e)^{ix}. The book is a stringent, vociferous critique of neo-liberal capitalism. But this criticism is once again done by the cipher of ‘the girl’ as a debased signifier of capitalist debasement. (Here, no surprise, is a reprise of the self-corroborating, irrefutably circular ‘logic’!) The book is a “collage...of aphorisms and quotations from writers, theorists, and fashion magazines, each page...a series of textual hook-ups” that relentlessly insists on “girlphobic connections between girls and capitalism”. ‘The girl’s’ “connection to masquerade, visibility, and triviality” is mobilised as a key to revealing” the “deceptions and lures” of the consumerism that has become neoliberalism’s normative reason” (Lamm 2015: 118). Very controversially, Tiqqun claims that ‘the girl’ is not really to do with gender at all, but is merely a metaphoric exemplification of contemporary culture’s characteristic form of subjectivity, embodying the ways in which *everyone* and *everything* has rapaciously been “Young-Girlified” in the service of reproducing the commodity culture of late capitalism.

And now we arrive at an interesting turn: it is Gurlesque poet Ariana Reines who was commissioned to translate *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (2012) into English, occasioning a difficult tension, even a clash, between discrepant notions of ‘girl’ and ‘gurl’. The eighteen-month translation process is described by Reines as something she

suffered through, experiencing viscerally: it was a “painful surrogacy”; it caused her to feel “agonized”; the text’s representation of girls as ‘empty’ came to “infect” her. In the poetic-ideological engagements of translation, a word or a concept cannot be envisaged as able to find its exact correlative, and the struggles faced by a translator highlight the ways in which meaning is always constructed in language, rather than being simply ‘out there’, to be neutrally retrieved for dispassionate communication. Instead, the translation process is a site of struggle over meaning, and as a female poet who identifies as Gurlesque, Ariana Reines found herself at odds with Tiquin’s project. She recoiled at Tiquin’s trivialisation of ‘the girl’. She shuddered at the denialist misogyny of Tiquin’s textual depictions of girliness. She balked at Tiquin’s refusal to concede that ‘the girl’ as used in *Theory of the Young-Girl* was clearly a gendered construct. The book was not about ‘girlification’ as some free-floating signifier of general cultural co-optation; it was about the ways in which *girls and women* are taught to function in society *and yet* can elude such doxa. For Reines, whose understanding of ‘the girl’ as a contested and always palimpsest female category had been developed in the crucible of her writing as a Gurlesque poet, the book was guilty of *abusing* ‘the young girl’ and her older female counterparts, situating them as stupid dupes, as trivial, silly and gullible, at once representative of and absorbed into The Culture’s superficiality. She saw that the book “contains passages rife with heterosexist *resentment* and, occasionally, whiffs of (what seemed to me to be) female intellectual rage against the more vapid and conformist members of our sex”. She says: “translating this book made me sick. I mean it gave me migraines, made me puke; I couldn’t sleep at night, regressed into totally out-of-character sexual behaviour”. She writes: in this book, “capital’s colonization and deployment of defiled aspects of the feminine could perplex many readers, trapping them in useless arguments”, rather than enabling them to *re-configure* girliness as *gurl*. The long process of translating the book wore her down, “beat [] me into submission”. She ventures that, perhaps “like something colonized”, during the translation process she got “used to my position vis-à-vis the master”. Struggles. Accommodations. Internalisations. Subjugation. Abjection. Refusals. Vomiting up. As Reines’s comments should imply, a poetic interest in the Tiquin volume – specifically an interest directed from a Gurlesque point of view – seeks to hypermediate between the discontinuities of “idealization and denigration”, innovation and tradition, through which young female subjectivity and voice are imprinted. Instead of merely treating ‘girl’ as “transparent”, an “outline of a shape through which...capitalism move[s] and circulate[s]” (Lamm 2015:122), Gurlesque poems trouble the easy categories. As Lamm remarks, the poetry of Ariana Reines is a body of work that “dissolve[s] the...dichotomy”

between what she terms the cocky ‘can-do girl’ and the vulnerable ‘at-risk-girl’, and in so doing manifests as an instance of a Gurlesque poetry that “disrupt[s]” the “expectation that girls provide neoliberalism with...resources” (2015:123).

My discussion of Tiqqun’s volume has been no mere digression. Gesturing towards the important scholarship being conducted in critical girlhood studies, I am trying to set the scene for my reader to understand the potentialities of a Gurlesque poetics for young women poets. Set in comparison against the debilitating narrows of Tiqqun’s theory of ‘the Young-Girl’, a Gurlesque poetics opens up a wider, more complex space of thinking and representation about forms of youthful femaleness. A Gurlesque poetics can find both value and variance in relating ‘girl’ to consumer culture. It is not interested in an *a priori* delimiting of ‘the feminine’ *versus* ‘the feminist’, for example; it casts and recasts, coins and recoins, such that ‘girl’ becomes a complex cultural currency, invested with agency, and yet also experienced through networks of delimiting relation. In a Gurlesque poetics, girl manifests as gurl, both powerfully and playfully experimenting with ways to re-find naturalised foundational concepts that shape female materialities. When understood in relation to the critical discourses of the emergent discipline of girlhood studies, then, a Gurlesque poetics, without being mere celebration, offers an imaginative promise, a necessarily *complex* investment in working through girlness into more contradictory, contrarian, even controversial forms of gurlness, grrrlness, even wily girliness.

Riot Grrrls

In the cultural frame of Grrrl Scenes, Riot Grrrls is acknowledged by Greenberg as a reference point in her imagining of Gurlesque aesthetics. “Like riot grrrls,” says Montel in an online review of the *Gurlesque* anthology on her “Ms.Blog” blog, “the poets attack unrealistic ideals with aggression, and at the same time find power and pleasure in the often ridiculous mental states they produce” (2011: np). Riot Grrrls was an outraged and outrageous 1990s female social movement and cultural initiative that emerged among women musicians and fans in the punk and indie rock scenes, when women grew tired of a boys’-only, misogynist environment that tended to relegate girls to forms of passive embodiment as fans, fucks, females rather than agentic forces (see Eichorn 2013). With a powerful renegade energy, girls “started forming their own, girl-only mosh pits in front of rock clubs. Girls held events. Girls started bands”. Greenberg notes that the mood of this movement was

multiple: “righteous indignation”, “insecurity”, “unity”, “prettiness”, “performance”, “honesty”, “transgression” (Greenberg 2010: 5-6), a “grassroots movement” of “young punk feminism” in which “the word ‘girl’ became ‘grrrl’, to denote a snarling, angry young woman who was no longer prepared to be ‘nice’” (Harris 2003: 46).

Extract from the Riot Grrrl Manifesto (1991)

(http://www.onewarart.org/riot_grrrl_manifesto.htm)

BECAUSE we don't wanna assimilate to someone else's (boy) standards of what is or isn't.

BECAUSE we are unwilling to falter under claims that we are reactionary "reverse sexists" AND NOT THE TRUEPUNKROCKSOULCRUSADERS THAT WE KNOW we really are.

BECAUSE we know that life is much more than physical survival and are patently aware that the punk rock "you can do anything" idea is crucial to the coming angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours.

BECAUSE we are interested in creating non-hierarchical ways of being AND making music, friends, and scenes based on communication + understanding, instead of competition + good/bad categorizations.

BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives.

BECAUSE we see fostering and supporting girl scenes and girl artists of all kinds as integral to this process.

BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak.

BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousy and self defeating girltype behaviors.

BECAUSE I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real.

Many of the Riot Grrrl proponents were in their teens, but the idea was also for women to reclaim the powerfulness of girlhood, a time of female ascendancy in which, despite the culture's attempt to shape and harness girlhood into a set of manageable norms, multiple horizons of experience still seemed open, possible. Or, considered slightly differently: the idea was for 'girls', in their exploration of a 'grrrlness' contra the projected horizons of Proper Womanhood, to open femininity to more edgy, femme energies and fantasies. The growl of 'grrrls' recasts any docile, naturalised notion of 'girls', the recognizable cultural and linguistic category, as a more feisty, snarling, less biddable force, an unruly, recalcitrant power akin to that of an untamed beast. Normative girlhood, in grrrls, becomes a 'queer' time and place beyond the prescribed norms. (As we will see, *Gurlesque* harnesses this energy in intriguing ways, bringing the powers of the feminine and the feminist together. If the poetry in the *Gurlesque* anthology, as Wallace notes, often tackles familiar questions of female selfhood, it diverges from the rage, experiential female affirmation, and confessional intimacy of women's poetry written under the ideological aegis of first and second wave feminism. Much of the poetry "has the power of a very high speed something or other whose path it would be dangerous to be in" [2010:np].) These are poems which may have "surprise and kick in the lines"; poems which, while informed by academic theory and feminist politics, also rachet up the confessional impulse into a lowbrow, layperson's poetic space of "ragged, watch-this-fall-apart-but-not-quite flarf"^x (Wallace 2010:np).

In the music scene of 1990s North America, where even punk and alternative music had become commercialised, the Riot Grrrl Movement "opened up a space within the subculture of indiepunkundergroundwhatever for young women to start skipping and veering towards a new kind of feminism, a new bunch of strategies to talk about misogyny and how to change the world" (Greenberg 2009: 6). Significantly, this movement had no identifiable leader, it emerged as a collective impulse from the zeitgeist, implying a wave of more general dissatisfactions and desires among a youth-culture subset in which young women wished to locate and express female agency. Riot Grrrls created a sub-cultural alternative to the mainstream, expressly gendered "girl power" (2009: 6) marketed in popular consumer culture, which often functioned as a structure of governmentality in seeking to channel female assertiveness, independence, sassiness, youth and discretionary income towards profit motives and market value (see McRobbie 2001 and Harris 2003). Riot Grrrls, in contrast,

fostered a paradoxically renegade climate from within, where a girl or a young woman could say “No means no, asshole. And yes means yes. And girl means girl except when it doesn’t, which is sometimes” (Greenberg 2009: 1). There was an insistence on the possibilities of the multiple in relation to the singular affirmation, an assertion of a young woman’s right to define her preferred boundaries differentially, in different contexts, and for language, too, to be understood as a flexible conceptual medium, rather than a categorical definitive. For Riot Grrrls, if this was marked by tensions, and contradictions – deal with it!

In reading poetry from young American women in 2001, Greenberg noticed recalcitrant commonalities, asking “Can I call what I saw *similarities*? I could”. However, she continued, “I’d rather call them ghosts: timeghosts rising up from the pages of these young books” (2009: 3). In this, I sense something of a haunting affidavit quality, the work of the younger poets not easily able to find affirmative predecessors, and yet intuiting in various poets of a female tradition faint, interrupted rhizomes of thinking which could possibly, with some leaps and deft footwork, lead towards the form of writing that would come to be called ‘Gurlesque’. Greenberg mentions in particular Sylvia Plath as a precursor of the Gurlesque, a writing relation which I expand on later in this section. As will become clear, when Plath meets Riot Grrrls and they hang around, what emerges is a form of Gurlesque aesthetic in which femaleness manifests not as a familiar, manageable signifier, but a messy, conflicted, volatile force: variously archly sardonic and poignant, playful and lacerating, louche and boisterously loud, political and personal, feminine and feminist.

The young women who shaped Riot Grrrls blended retro and contemporary fashions into a radically alternative expression of femaleness that refused the neatly categorical, and often parodied ‘nice’ expectations associated with ‘proper’ female gender modelling and capitulation to capitalist marketing of femaleness. They were known for their sexually-risqué edits of school uniform-like skirts, plastic butterfly hairclips and brightly dyed hair. Alongside this appropriation of iconoclastic youthful cuteness (at once a sexualised taboo and an insistence on the growing agency of even the disempowered), they were notorious for writing with black markers on their bodies, claiming words such as bitch, dyke and cunt (Greenberg 2009: 5) as part of their scandalous rebellious repertoire. In taking back into and onto themselves a slew of gender discriminatory slurs habitually used by a patriarchal male culture to designate female subordination and female inconsequence, and to mark out the cultural lines which ‘good girls’ ought not to transgress - ‘pussy’, ‘bitch’, ‘whore’ - Riot Grrrls expressly “wanted to take back language” and in doing so reclaim for their own, independent futures the intense, vigorous prerogative of a girlhood that had been hijacked by

patriarchy in its links to both gendered norms and the platitudinous femininities of contemporary consumer culture. This particular notion of taking language back in order to reconfigure female identity politics in the Riot Grrrls movement, as Greenberg suggests, is a key influence on Gurlesque poetics. The so-called Gurlesque poets constantly manipulate the boundaries of language as a non-transparent medium, and capitalise on a Third Wave feminist irony that at times morphs into the defiantly glib and the flippant (see Krieger 2012).

In Marsh's paper, for example, sub-titled 'Go-go grrrl' is a reference to both the 'riot grrrls' of the early nineties *and* the 'go-go' girls of the sixties, expanding the 'girl' connotations even further. This link implies that in a Gurlesque poetics, renegade political-cultural resistance and the exhibition of an apparently commodified female sexuality are brought into a shared space, asking us to consider the extent to which embodiment entails a politics not only of complicity and accommodation, but also of transgressive agency. As Marsh notes, the wording of her title points to her interest in what these sexually emancipated and ironic moments of counter-culture might mean for female expression (Marsh 2004: np). My present chapter speculates on similar impulses, in relation to a Gurlesque poetics.

Grrrlzines

Also notable in the grrrl cultural landscape that preceded and underwrote the subsequent formation of a Gurlesque poetry scene was the rise of grrrlzines. These zines were a rebelliously female sub-cultural print media that the Gurlesque tendencies in contemporary poetry could be said to draw on. 'Grrrlzine culture' as it has evolved comprises a "trans-national network of young women who make 'zines' - either print newsletters/magazines or webpages", sites where "contemporary images of girlhood" are encountered, visualised, discussed, "challenged and deconstructed" (Harris 2003:38):

grrrlzines are a communicative medium and a community for this network of young women, within which they can participate in debates about the meaning of girlhood under late modernity and young women's 'place' in late modern, de-industrialized societies - debates from which they are often excluded within the public sphere. Grrrlzines offer spaces for young women to discuss..., to wrestle with and parody contemporary images of girlhood. In doing so, they help to complicate and advance...the 'problem' of girls' silence and invisibility in the context of late modernity.

(Harris 2003: 38)

While I cannot explore in detail the possible entanglements of Gurllesque poetry and its hyperbolic mobilising of pop cultural referents and the rebellious cultural medium of grrrlzines, there might be an interesting case to be made for the poetry as a correlative cultural outlet and analogous ‘poetics’. (This holds, too, for sites like GrrrlVirus and “other riot grrrl revival blogs” [Sutton 2011: np].) Such forms, while they may on occasion appear to be “complicit in the silencing of young women by insisting on expression only within liminal spaces”, could, via this very liminality, be seen as imaginative media which enable “some young women to evade new regulatory regimes” (Harris 2003:38) associated with late modernity in which, as Angela McRobbie argues, girls’ “bodies, their labour power and their social behaviour are...the subject of governmentality to an unprecedented degree” (2001:1). “For example, in a zine that discusses sexual assault or the privatization of women's prisons, one might also find recipes for hair dye, and the pages decorated with glitter and Hello Kitty images” (Harris 2003: 48).

As Nicky Marsh notes in her paper in the influential journal of experimental women’s writing *How2*, the Riot Grrrl movement’s “breaking with” both the abstractions of theory and the solipsisms of therapy “allowed an articulation of the oppressions and pleasures... identified with the corporeality of a gendered body” (2004:np), and this break was expressed in music, in art and in writing – all forms of an imaginative performative through which femaleness as cultural signifier could be shaken up. It really is necessary to understand that while Riot Grrrl originated as a music impetus, it also prompted the proliferation of counter-cultural zines that featured “ ‘go-go girl’ ” women poets (eg Joan Jobe Smith, Lyn Lifshin, Ann Menebroker and Linda King) who expressed aspects of women’s experience through “confessional roughened poetry” and an “overt sexualisation...seen as emancipatory”, and premised on “a rejection of [the] perceived literary separatism” of high and low cultures, “and an attention to the sexual pleasures and erotic energies of heterosexuality”. In these poems, sex is “a source of humour, a source of self-effacement, a source of resistance, a source of anger, a source of income as well as a source of emotional and physical pain and pleasure” (Marsh 2004:np). In terms of both grrrl poetry and grrrl zines as influences on the Gurllesque, it is significant, too, that “when one uses the search term grrrl, one locates a list of sites not only alternate but also antithetical” to more commodified, mainstream ‘girl’ sites. For all that some critics object to the apparent diminution of femaleness associated even with the reworking of ‘girl’ into ‘grrrl’, there remains a powerful sense in which the adjective “grrrl [sic] avoids belittling representations of what it means to be female in this culture and finds sites that identify themselves as empowering” to girls and young women (Takvoshi 1999: 97-

99). A similar approach to that of riot grrrl characterises much Gurlesque poetry, in its “troubling girlpower” (Harris 2003: 49) and unsettling consumer culture’s vocabulary of sexualised femaleness. To adapt Marsh’s remarks: the poets tend to be almost ‘metafictionally’ aware of the challenges they face in avoiding their “transgressive sexual images being appropriated by a consumer culture anxious to provide a lucrative woman’s market with innovation, especially one marketable in terms of a youthful and apparently liberating sexual voracity” (Marsh 2004: np). In their gendered exaggerations of femaleness, many Gurlesque poets treat sexuality with a wry or even mocking sardonic tone, undercutting both moralising earnestness and advertising’s insistent hyper-spectacle of female sexuality as both object and currently expected bodily agency.

Burlesque

[From French, *comical*, from Italian *burlesco*, from *burla*, *joke*, probably from Spanish, from Vulgar Latin **burrula*, diminutive of Late Latin *burrae*, *nonsense*, from *burra*, *wool*.]

As the sound and eye rhyme of ‘Gurlesque’ implies, a further influence upon this poetics-information is the Burlesque. In speaking about the Burlesque as an influence on a Gurlesque poetics, Glenum (probably under the influence of popular ideas that burlesque entails saucy or salacious ‘bump-and-grind’) refers to Burlesque as a ‘strip-tease’ which is “unladylike” (Glenum 2009:11-12). In common parlance, burlesque has also been used to describe a variety show performance format that is characterised by raunchy dancing and ribald comedy. However, burlesque is a far more nuanced form, wit elements akin to sophisticated cabaret performance. So as to do justice to the forms of female agency that, I am arguing, characterise a Gurlesque poetics, the term needs more subtle intellectual unpacking. Burlesque is in fact an old literary impulse which entails mocking imitation or ludicrous parody – travesty, in other words – often carried by outlandish exaggeration. It has its origins in political satire, and materializes in multidisciplinary forms, making it difficult to define and pin down (see Fargo 2008).

While the supposed sexiness or rude impropriety of the conventionally female ‘striptease’ does intersect well with aspects of a Gurlesque poetics, clearly also of relevance

is the question of “outlandish exaggeration” and cultural mockery - whether of subject matter or style or gendered codes of behaviour. Moreover, as I have been suggesting, such elements may seem contradictory, but are deliberately invited to co-exist in the (anti)aesthetic conceptual space of a Gurlesque poetics, and indeed within a single Gurlesque poem. A poet may hyperbolise elements of femaleness, with a view to social critique, for example, but also so as to assert the validity of femaleness as contrarian and complex performance that escapes preferred categories. Additionally, in dictionary references to the meanings of burlesque, I note the mention of the humorous, as well as the eclectic mode of the variety show, both of which are pertinent to the comedic/satiric impulse of a Gurlesque, and to the diversity of modes through which this poetics stages the female, the feminine, the femme, the feminist...

In typifying the burlesque as a form of “strip-tease”, and casually implying links with a Gurlesque poetics, Glenum in fact loses excellent opportunities for engaging more deeply with burlesque as a performative mode with a long history as a complex, potentially transformative cultural phenomenon. By extension, then, she limits one’s understanding of a Gurlesque poetics in relation to burlesque. Glenum does not grant the fact that burlesque is a longstanding *literary* mode, respected for its ebullient (even disreputable) performance of social satire. Chaucer penned several allegorical burlesques, for example, and from the seventeenth century in England, France and Spain, we see a growing burlesque tradition in poetry, leading to a proliferation of poems, in the eighteenth century, of lines mocking fake great people, using an exaggeratedly hyperbolic style and otiose language. These pieces are essentially a comedy of manners, in verse (see Allen 1991). Additionally, the burlesque, in *literature*, encompasses serio-comic imitation “of a serious literary or artistic form that relies on an extravagant incongruity between a subject and its treatment. In burlesque the serious is treated lightly and the frivolous seriously; genuine emotion is sentimentalized, and trivial emotions are elevated to a dignified plane” (<https://global.britannica.com/art/burlesque-literature>). As the examples of Gurlesque poetry on which I have already commented show, such incongruities are features of this mode too.

Even leaving aside (if we could) the burlesque as a literary mode relevant to Gurlesque poetry, and if we were to remain within Glenum’s ambit of burlesque as a saucy female-agented “strip-tease” which is evident in the multiple female, feminine, feminist slants of Gurlesque poems, we would need to take matters further. Let me put it this way. We should understand that a Gurlesque interest in the use of language to strip away conventional notions of femaleness, while at the same time playfully reconfiguring femininity in ways that chafe against moralising versions of feminism, has its antecedents in a variety of burlesque

practices. Glenum references these, but could develop these further. Burlesque, in its presently debased incarnation as mere “strip-tease”, harkens back to mid- and late nineteenth-century stage farce, to theatrical lampooning and punning which upended genteel niceties, and staged parodic treatments of grand classical myths and allusions. In other words, burlesque entailed very mobile forms of performativity – of both voice and body – which endowed it with a powerfully iconoclastic quality via which to debunk received ideas, precious attachments and sacred cows (see Allen 1991: 10). In particular, burlesque was historically a “gender-mocking” form.

Early forms of burlesque performance in America and Britain were the preserve of female writers, female performers and female producers. The shows were characterised by quick-witted improvisation, “nonsensical dialogue”, and humorous topicality (Salem 1994: 32). The shows featured impertinent jokes, sexual innuendo, an irreverent, worldly manner, and “provocative parodies” of bourgeois respectability – all of which brought popular acclaim but also moral rebuke (Allen 1991). The female burlesque performance team “took wicked fun in reversing roles” and “shattering polite expectations, brazenly challenging notions of the approved ways women might display their bodies and speak in public” (Trachtenberg 1991: xii).

Consider this comment regarding a notable burlesque ensemble of 1860s America: “her stage manner was bold and swaggering: she faced the audience directly, projecting a self-awareness which transcended her stage character”. The “central characteristic...was this combination of female sexual spectacle and verbal insubordination”, “brazenness”, “cleverness”, “impertinence of...dialogue”. If “the ideal femininity of the period called for self-effacement, modesty, and a hidden, controlled sexuality, Thompson and her troupe made sexual spectacles of themselves, unabashedly claiming the gaze of the audiences” (Salem 1994: 32). Such burlesque performance “constituted a disturbing power” (Salem 1994: 32), a deliberately “problematic femininity” (Allen 1991). For William Dean Howells, in the 1860s, this comprised a “horrible prettiness” which made the female performers appear “unlike women” although “not like men”; they “seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both. It was certainly a shocking thing...their archness in which there was no charm, their grace which put to shame” (quoted in Allen 1991: 134).

In fact, burlesque was a thorn, Robert Allen argues, not simply because it in general breached general middle-class propriety, but because it was an articulate and permissive *female* theatrical performativity which extravagantly transgressed the norms of conventional *feminine* behaviour and appearance. Precisely because burlesque was a gender disobedient

cultural form, a *female*-centred irruption of women's power into the status quo, it was seen to pose a severe threat and attracted censure. No surprise that it was gradually defused, turned into the now familiar risqué strip-tease for men's pleasure. In this process, critics contend, the burlesque performer forfeited her voice, her power of speech, and burlesque was tamely recast as the titillating display of the female body *for male* audiences (Allen 1991). (Furthermore, "the marketplace of popular entertainment" at the time was in general "becoming increasingly segregated along class and gender lines", and in order to remain competitive, the managers of burlesque troupes responded by "offering ever more sexual spectacle,...eschewing the intricate verbal punning of Thompsonian burlesque in favor of pretexts for parading scantily-clad women across the stage" [Salem 1994:33].) Scintillating "wit, daring eroticism, and shuddering assault on all forms of respectability" were gradually replaced by a stratified and professionalised burlesque scene, managed by "male bookers, producers and money". Burlesque "lost its corny campy edge", and its "power to unsettle and subvert". It lapsed into "the stylised erotic gyrating" that became the fare of the male fantasies catered to in strip shows (Trachtenberg 1991: xii).

To adapt Alan Trachtenberg's comments regarding the burlesque: once we have paid attention to burlesque as a vital cultural historical form which certainly did not begin as "strip-tease", we are more alert to a Gurlesque poetics as potentially "a way of listening to and watching the popular voices, images and moving bodies of contemporary life" (1991: xiv). We become better equipped to appreciate that the jangly Gurlesque mix of the shocking, grotesque, colloquial, outspoken, ridiculous, oblique and sometimes conceptually entangled comprises a valid aesthetic, one capable of commenting on the jarring pleasures and perversities of contemporary femaleness as various combinations of sceptical, critically-reflective distance and immersed experience. Nothing is sacrosanct in this irreverent space. Indeed, even in terms of what we might loosely call poetic 'genre', a Gurlesque poetics, as in the transgressive mix of performative modes which make up burlesque, entails an innovative reconfiguring of discursive genres drawn from poetic traditions - lyric voicing, conceptual experimentalism, the confessional, dramatic monologues ... - and beyond, being inflected with advertising language, celebrity-speak, cultural theory, fairy tales, surrealism. In particular, I think, a Gurlesque brings together feminine and feminist in provocative ways. The success of a Gurlesque poetics is to pay no heed to the supposed oppositionality of these forms of femaleness, and to invite strange bedfellows to play, and chat and argue. Discomforting. And yet necessary. Female, feminine, feminist...each, in its way, has been decried as a dirty word applied to women, and a Gurlesque poetics permissively encourages a

cross-contamination that enables strikingly innovative contemporary female poetries that blur the categories of the concrete and the abstract, the experiential and the conceptual.

Within the expansive and often difficult field of experimental contemporary women's poetry, a Gurlesque poetics, we could argue, is, in the manner of the burlesque, a form that upends elite or erudite cultures; it re-contextualises *popular* discourses around femaleness and is – to use a term increasingly common among students – 'relatable' rather than obscure. It is populated with gender roles that reference and mix many consumer cultural genres, a pastiche of adverts, comics, movies, cartoons, often with a black comedic effect. As a self-identified Gurlesque poet Ariana Reines says in an interview, "I'm a stand-up, vaudeville poet. So a certain kind of comedy is inescapable for me in the scene of literature" that is poetry (Lerner and Reines 2014: 72). Speaking of poetry readings, too, as performances, she speculates playfully about how to "deal with the embarrassment of wondering why people do come" to readings. She asks, am 'I' "a fetish object for 'sincerity,' or a chump, or the court jester, or what"? For herself, as poet in the space of performance, it's "more that I'm staging a situation in which I can try to sound out for myself modes of address as I discovered them in literature and as they unfold bewilderingly in life...I learn from it" (Lerner and Reines 2014: 75). Even when a Gurlesque *does* turn to theoretical concepts, these tend to be carried through an everyday range of reference, a language and image repertoire that acknowledges and uses the powers of consumer culture and celebrity culture in their shaping of 'femaleness'. Similar to burlesque, a Gurlesque poetry has an element of popular entertainment to it, being interested in a comic-satiric reworking of dominant ideas, whether these entail media images of sex, or forms of feminist advocacy for women's empowerment which fail to grant agency to female desire. In the tradition of a literary burlesque, a Gurlesque poetics relishes a rampant impropriety, strategically refusing, or coyly eluding, adopting and adapting, many dominant codes of female behaviour.

Yet something of "the original vitality of the burlesque" has survived in traces, reappearing in the twentieth century figure of the "unruly woman" (Trachtenberg 1991: xiii). I am suggesting that a Gurlesque poetics might be one contemporary example of this persistent female energy. In terms of the contemporary revival of burlesque performance, the neo Burlesque "continues to tangle...in both literal and emblematic ways" (Fargo 2008:3) with the central, furiously-debated question that marked the original forum of the historical burlesque, namely "What does it mean to be a woman" (Allen 1991: 27)? Modern burlesque "allows women to explore, experiment with, and perform their sexuality, whether from the stage or from the audience" (Fargo 2008:3).

In thinking through the possible shapes of Gurlesque poetic practices, Glenum notes that burlesque performers, for instance, “are neither men nor women”. She emphasises that in blurring gender identification, burlesque “makes acts of obedience to the law and acts of transgression the same” (2001: 12), a paradoxical process of substitution which effaces neat gender categoricals.^{xi} Let me use as an example Brenda Coultas’s poem “Dream life in a case of transvestism”:

1.

I’m in a man’s uniform with military creases in the shirt. I search an informant for drugs and money, to verify that she goes in clean. It’s very hot. She wears a tank top, shorts, and slip on shoes. She pulls up her top; nothing beneath her breasts but a wire taped on for sound. I looked down her shorts, pubic hair shaved. Check inside the sole of her shoes. Nothing. It’s daylight and we are in an empty railroad yard.

2.

My sister and I walk down the midway in matching sailor suits. My cousin Tommy is dressed in a nautical jacket, carrying a cane with a ceramic dalmatian head. All the carnie barkers watch. They wish they were dressed like us.

3.

At a party for girls only, I wear a can-can dress with big kittens on the skirt. It has velcro zipper that I like to open and close. We take our clothes off. They all turn out to be boys. Later I found out that I went on the wrong day.

4.

I am a woman dresses as a man dressed as a woman. I am so much a Woman I do not recognize myself. Yet I have never been more of a man.

My testicles lie beneath my skin and I touch the two knots in my groin. When I swear I place my right hand upon them and tell the truth, as told by me, a liar.

5.

Since I became a woman dressed as a man dressed as a women, I lost my virginity. There are sixteen types of hymens. I had thirteen of them. My hymen was a chameleon that hung from a chain on my sweater and changed shaped constantly.

“What is that on your sweater?”

“Its just an old maidenhead that I spray painted gold and glued some sequins onto.”

6.

I lost it in a car in Kentucky, beneath the bridge where I was born in the car's back seat. My father drove, the doctor in back with my mother. My father drove faster and faster. Her pains came closer and closer together. The crown of my head emerged. We were late crossing the water. All of us were very, very late.

(2010: 43-5)

This poem presents as an elaborate puzzle, teasingly goading a reader towards figuring out the gender of the speaker, even while daring a reader to keep an open mind. If one is cued by the name of the poet, the assumption is likely to be, oh, yes, evidently female. The possible miscue here is also the inclination to conflate poet and speaker. In this collapsing of the creative gap between author and persona, however, there would occur a simplistic refusal to allow not only the necessary distinction that poetry criticism has historically made between poet and speaker but also the necessary lacunae through which gender is mediated in the space of the poem. Current scholarship on contemporary women's poetry finds in this space a very productive way of thinking about poetry as a form which masquerades as autobiographical, and in doing so highlights the mistaken belief in autobiographical writing as the essentialised expression of self (see Gill and Waters 2009). Glenum avers that "for the Gurlisque poet, the use of the lyric 'I' does not confess a self". Rather than pointing to the authentic, feeling expression of lyric subjectivity and experience that readers seem (for better or for worse) to have learnt, by convention, to think is a feature of lyric poetry, the poem is configured as a mobile space in which ostensible confession may be a con, a masquerade, an exploration of 'I' exhibited and imagined identities. Coultas cunningly plays into this confusion. The poem's fourth section reads "I am a woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman. I am so much a/woman I do not recognise myself. Yet I have never been more of a man" (2009: 43). This is an extreme layering of gender and of orientation that eludes identification. The result is confusing for a reader, who instead, for example, of being asked to engage a poem which references empirical 'women's experience' such as pregnancy, or menstruation, is abandoned in a disorientating idea-space which dresses and addresses gender codes and materialities as troubling.

In section one of the poem, the speaker begins: "I'm in a man's uniform with military creases in the shirt". Given that the speaker singles out for unusual comment the specified genderedness of the attire, as well as its connection to the disciplined protocols of presentation on which militarised practice insists as a form of potent control, a reader

imagines the speaker as female, a woman imagining herself a soldier. She as he is attired in the ‘masculine’ uniformity of a profession still more open to men than to women (and indeed historically hostile towards queer and trans identifying people). The soldier goes on to perform a body check on “an informant”, who is a woman. The poem seems to cross and re-cross gendered boundaries even in the actions of surveillance that the speaker performs, the soldier – whether male or female – carrying out the routinised policing of hegemonic, heterosexual patriarchy, in which boundaries between X and Y, us and them, men and women, are enforced in order to maintain clarity. In a sense, the ‘cross-dressed’ speaker, despite a reader’s intuition that her/his/their gender moves confusingly across a gender spectrum, performs as professionally demanded by the soldier’s role. The poem brings us intimately into the invasion of the supposed informant’s privacy: the speaker notices that she has shaved her pubic hair (a mark of personal preference which might also be cultural) and which is open to interpretation as aesthetic, hygienic, erotic, perhaps a mark of difference, in relation to the speaker’s own notions of female bodily practices. In a further, albeit non-sexualised intimacy, the speaker says that “inside the soles of her shoes. Nothing”. Just as the speaker seems to be placed in a situation where ‘she’ must do ‘her’ best to discover and police subversive transgressions that are increasingly thought to be a feature of the dangerous ‘foreign body’, so a reader is analogously looking very closely at the speaker, checking and re-checking in the hope that ‘she’ will – finally - reveal ‘herself’ as *herself*. Instead, a reader, caught in the discomfiting complicity of the matter-of-fact poem, is obliged to make do with queer and querying. It could be said that Coultas is purposefully creating the speaker as a figure of uncertainty, making the poem an act of subversion regarding assumptions about what is so-called female behaviour and what is so-called male behaviour. The poem implies that while femaleness might subtend a social role, the role in some sense demands its own iterative performance, which empties out self into the necessary display of duty. And yet, the gender slipperiness of the poem cannot quite be resolved, and it could be that in playing with, *blurring*, typically male and female roles of agency and passivity, power and nurturing which mark Cartesian dualism, Coultas is in her poem performing “a raucously messy nest of conflicting desires and proclivities” of gender (Glenum 2009: 13).

The poem continues to play with the dressing up of gender. It is rather like an “is she or is she not?” game that the poet is playing with the reader. In section three, the speaker says:

3.

At a party for girls only, I wear a can-can dress with big kittens on the skirt. It has velcro zipper that I like to open and close. We take our clothes off. They all turn out to be boys. Later I found out that I went on the wrong day.

Coultas is showing the reader the “constructedness of gender through extreme hyperbole” associated with a burlesque lens. The reader may see how the poet can ‘try on’ and ‘take off’ and then subvert gender stereotypes. (Note that in colloquial terms, the expression ‘to take off’ also means to perform a parody, or to mock something.) Here, we might think of the familiar poetic term ‘persona’. For Glenum, however, the ludic Gurlesque ventriloquisms of poems such as the piece by Coultas are notable for *not* being persona poems. She explains: to “engage in persona is to assume there is a face beneath the mask. Gurlesque poets, on the contrary, assume there is no such thing as coherent identity” (2009: 13). Fair enough. As my own analysis of the Coultas poem suggests, though, even as an exhibitionary performative of dress, practice, language, behavior...gender cannot fully escape biology, despite biology not being deterministic. While I have some differences with Glenum in this respect, I remain intrigued by the likelihood that a Gurlesque poetics claims the right to stage the constantly changing mask *as* identity, rather than essentialising some single coherent self ‘behind’ the mask.

Coultas’s poem ends with the speaker describing her birth. This is also a move that inverts more usual expectations of closure or poetic epiphany. The mother is in the back seat of the car with the doctor as the father speeds over a bridge. The speaker says: “the crown of my head emerged. We were late crossing the water, All of us were very, very/late” (2009: 45-6). It is not a coincidence that the poem ends in a birthing scene. As the baby is crowning, the speaker is coming into the socially gendered space of her female being. However, the speaker insists in a collective lateness in “crossing the water”. While this may refer merely to the fact of the baby being born before the parents could reach the hospital, on the other side of the bridge over the water, the poem also invites a more metaphoric reading. In the chaos of the birthing - woman and men and coming baby; speeding car and straddling bridge and the interruptions of wide water and relentless long road – the occupants of the vehicle are all thrown together into a threshold space which jumbles the pragmatic with the anxious, desire with fear, intimacy with strangeness. Into such a space - hurtling forward, hauling the vestiges of a past, all on the precipitous verge of another life beginning – the poem seems to imply the mixed messiness of identity and relation, a co-implication which may also extend to gender understood as performed and volatile.

A Theoretical Elaboration on ‘the Performative’

One sense in which Glenum is, I believe, correct, is that she makes an attempt to position the “strip-tease” as a mode of the performative. This clearly does intersect with the burlesque as I have outlined it above, and again highlights the value, for a contemporary scholar investigating the verbal and conceptual ‘stagings’ associated with a Gurlesque, of an historical understanding of the burlesque form. Glenum proposes that the contemporary women poets who incline towards a Gurlesque emphasise not some essentialised self, some ‘actual’ identity, but “only the performance of self” (2009: 3). This challenges idealised modes of lyric expressivity and authenticity of ‘self experience’, situating self as culturally inflected and saturated. Glenum proposes that through a form of deliberate performative enactment of words and ideas as embodiment, Gurlesque poets may unsettle received ideas of bodily display and revelation. In poems variously ludic, aggressive, contradictory and contorted, these women poets may foreground the *self-reflexive* verbal display of the “gendered surface of the body”, exemplifying Judith Butler’s provocation that we need to “[c]onsider gender... as a corporeal style, an ‘act’, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (2009: 12).

It is important to understand the theory of the performative which underpins this stylising, for it is not mere ‘theatricality’, as might mistakenly be assumed. Rather, performativity emphasises that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 1990: 140). It’s probably a good idea to spend a little time unpacking such ideas. Butler’s theory of the performative character of (female) gender identity developed out of Speech Act Theory (SAT). Here, identity is conceptualised as occurring through a constellation of linguistic acts. The locutionary act is the act of speaking, of saying. The illocutionary act is the nature of the act performed when one utters, the utterance serving to promise, warn, comfort, remind, threaten, and so on. This may be direct, using verb which explicitly conveys the act – ‘I promise I’ll come’, or it may be indirect, as in ‘I’ll come’. The perlocutionary act is the act which occurs on the part of the reader, listener, or viewer as a result of the utterance: s/he is persuaded, or alarmed, or comforted, as the instantiating act intended. However, as Göran Nieragden^{xii} explains:

The success of the acts depends on what has been termed felicity conditions: these are conditions of appropriateness which characterize the speaker's authority, clarity and intention in performing the illocutionary act, and the listener's willingness and ability

to act accordingly. The need for interpreting illocutionary acts, for which in recent accounts the term *speech act* is often used interchangeably, is clear especially in their indirect form and accounts for much of the humour, misunderstanding, innuendo and irony in both literary and ordinary

(2002:199)

These ideas are useful in relation to understanding a Gurléseque poetics as working to ‘perform’ femaleness in a series of language acts that troubles the norms. The linguistic-conceptual actions of a Gurléseque poem can be imagined as toggling between making, re-marking and re-making female codes “through a simultaneous ‘doing’ and ‘saying’” that is carried in various modes and tones, and in the ideas and images expressed in the vocabulary and diction (Nieragden 2002), in this way performing the limits and possibilities of a ‘female’ subject and the subjectivities of femaleness. Such enactments, as Nieragden explains in a discussion of the ‘I’ in examples of contemporary poetry by women, are “(a) performed by and through language”, are “(b)... not feasible outside the speech act,” and “(c), just like indirect speech in general...[are] subject to interpretation, misinterpretation, and re-interpretation”. In other words, the poetic speech act “can be successful, or it can fail” (199).

While I cannot comprehensively address Butler’s theory of gender performativity, it should be clear that she extrapolates from Speech Act Theory (SAT) so as to counter simplistic notions of femaleness as some inherent biological given. Instead, femaleness manifests as an iterative citation, its forms enacted as an effect of discourse. “the ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’” - for the purposes of Butler’s argument and of my case for a Gurléseque poetics, this being specifically the *female* person - “are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms (Butler 1990:1). To adapt her remarks regarding the expression of an ‘I’: the expression of femaleness therefore “has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to the life it animates; it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and without which it cannot speak” (1993:226). Articulations of femaleness (somewhat to simplify) occur under the aegis of what is socially given as Female. Butler emphasises:

The performative is not a singular act used by an already established subject, but one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into social being from diffuse social quarters, inaugurated into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations. In this sense the social performative is a crucial part not only of subject *formation*, but of the ongoing political contestation and reformulation of the subject as well.

(1997: 160)

In the context of a Gurlesque poetics, if a female poet, in seeking to articulate a Gurlesque take on femaleness, will of necessity be bound to filter her representations and ideas through direct and indirect existing discourses of femaleness, her action of ‘speaking’ should be understood not simply as a repeat or repetitive of the extant and ongoing, but as a *performative* participation in that which is ‘given’. Thus her rhetorical performance may be an actor in the constantly ongoing “contestation and reformulation” of the subject of femaleness, and of female subjectivity. Further, “multiple and co-existing identifications produce conflicts, convergences, and innovative dissonances within gender configurations which contest the fixity” of gender-coded “placements” (Butler 1990: 67) and it becomes possible to see that the idea of ‘performativity’ when used to describe “this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself” may enable a Gurlesque poet (as I am arguing) “to produce alternative modalities of power” (Butler 1993:241). A poem becomes a space in which female embodiment, identities, and repertoires are not merely reflective of a social given, but which offers a site for a poet to create a linguistically *innovative* detourné of received ideas, pulling norms loose, or folding assumptions awkwardly back upon themselves, revealing flaws and cracks. In such a space, through such movements, a Gurlesque poet enables gender to *re-materialise* with the effect of “free-floating artifice” (Butler 1990:6) and femaleness, as an expression of gender, is also understood as performed rather than fixedly in place. This performance may occur in conscious ways, as in the rampantly exaggerated provocations which feature in multiple Gurlesque poems, with the poets variously using, abusing and disabusing tropes of femininity as/and feminism. The performance *also* occurs less consciously, in naturalised everyday linguistic actions which designate femaleness: through the pronoun ‘she’, for example; or in adjectival commonplaces which attribute ‘the beautiful’ to women, and ‘the handsome’ to men; or ‘the feminine’ (and the intimate, trivial, emotional...) to the woman and ‘the masculine’ (and the public, serious, rational...) to the man. As Jonathan Culler explains, this means that your gender is iteratively “created by your acts, in the way that a promise is

created by the act of promising' (Culler 1997: 103). It is such 'promises' that a Gurlesque poetics at times affirms, and at other refuses, in the process highlighting the linguistic-conceptual 'makerliness' of girlness, femaleness, the feminine, and so on. The poems embody Butler's idea that the "very subject of woman [is] no longer understood in stable or abiding terms" (1990:1). As UK poet Emma Critchley explains of her own innovative poetics: "I see my writing as constituted of and by third wave, especially Butlerian, feminist thinking" because of the "focus on cultural performativity, and its refusal of a homogenous feminist project" (2015b).

Another relevant point is Butler's contention that "an utterance may gain its force precisely by virtue of the break with context that it performs" (1997: 149). A Gurlesque poetics, for example, breaks with the conceptual-experiential context which assumes 'the feminine' as sentimental, 'the cute' as girlish weakness, the feminist as necessarily strident opposition. A Gurlesque poetics elides and blurs, making it no easy task to 'determine' the usually 'policed' boundaries of female desire and duty, submission and agency. Indeed, it could be said that a Gurlesque poetics draws very discomforting attention to the *already* paradoxical strategies through which femaleness is constructed in culture, with a plethora of contradictory behaviours emplaced upon women. (Such contradictions bring to mind another point: despite early linguistic theory premised on the assumed dichotomy between supposedly unambiguous constative factual utterances and the *enactment* which more performative utterance entails, more poststructuralist and deconstructionist linguistics argues that *all* utterance is performative. Facts, as much as apparently clear gendered biologies, are *constituted*, and this constitutes a performance, even of the factual.)

In Butler's theory of performativity, as in a Gurlesque poetics, there is frequently an emphasis on the *physical*, precisely because gender is "produced through the stylization of the body" (Butler 1990: 140) which itself occurs via the forces of social existence which are themselves carried "within the terms of language" (Butler 1997: 5). My convoluted expression in this last sentence very deliberately expresses the complexity of the performative as conceptualised by Butler. To adapt Nieragden's point, in order to clarify: since a Gurlesque poet grants "that even the body-related parts of personal identity formation are subject to influential 'acts' from outside, such as peer group pressure and political climate" (2002: 215) she is interested in trying to "find (linguistic) ways of giving [*her*] look to this body" via the terms of imaginative language use offered in the discourse of poetry. Poetic representations are themselves acts of linguistic performance (Nieragden 2002) and a poem thus acknowledges the uneasy relation that exists between "a certain social existence of

the body” and the body which (however culture-bound) feels and is experienced as individual. A body becomes a “body-context” that is complexly inflected by the political and ideological context, rather than there being some “straightforward” reflection or correlation. The female body construed as culturally-located “body-context” becomes a “form of semiotic and social matrix or ‘web’” in which the poems and the poets frequently “show the ‘I’ as a notion in permanent ‘making’” (Nieragden 2002: 215), and femaleness as both inherited performance and as performance open to “the possibility of *resignification* as an alternative reading” of that which is, it seems constatively given (Butler 1997: 169).

It is such intricacies of performative negotiation and contingency that a Gurlesque poetics claims as the necessary field of play in engaging with forms of contemporary femaleness. As should be clear from the discussion above, in a Gurlesque poetics “there is no actual self, only the performance of self” (Glenum 2009: 3), by which I understand that while much lyric poetry has treated ‘self’ as an entity able to be represented without any difference between the real and the representational, in the Gurlesque, instead, many of the poets draw deliberate attention to the poem precisely as a space in which self is mediated *as an ongoing compositional enactment* and not as a self-evident, pre-existing essence. A self, like a poem, is not a finished object; it emerges and re-emerges through processes of mobile construction; of repercussion, emendation, refraction, elaboration.^{xiii} These ventriloquisms are complex. They are not simply demonstrating the “constructedness of gender through extreme hyperbole”, pointing to the fact that “there is a face beneath the mask”. Pushing further, they “assume that there is no such thing as coherent identity” (2001: 13) which simply awaits uncovering and unmediated expression. Instead, the very shape of the poem becomes a stage page upon which a poet can form and perform forms of identity which are not *performed*. Glenum’s assertion is that this is one of many things that sets apart Gurlesque poets from female Confessional and Neo-Confessional poets:

For the Gurlesque poet, the use of the lyric “I” does not confess a self, but rather a raucously messy nest of conflicting desires and proclivities that can be costumed this way or that. Disjunctions in identity are not to be worked through or resolved but savored and tapped for their cultural power.

(2001: 13)

It is a bold claim, worth considering. The Gurlesque ‘I’ could be said to take its form in multiple forms, purposefully destabilising assumptions about self-coherence, in favour of

contemporary theories which acknowledge the inevitable – and not *disabling* – constitution of ‘self’ as multiple and plurivocal disaggregation. In this sense, as Nieragden (2002) observes, an apparently consistent, personally-expressive lyric ‘I’ associated with poetic ‘voicing’ is deconstructed as a performative speech act. This is a consequential move. In much experimental or avant-garde writing, there has been a suspicion of the personal ‘I’, since ‘self’ is supposedly tied to the weak, confessional genre of lyric, a mode which innovative writing has sought to break free from, in pushing for more procedural, non-personal forms. A Gurlisque poetics, though, working on the assumption that the complex compositionality of femaleness remain a consequential node of sociocultural identity, and thus a valid site of poetic engagement, sometimes *reclaims* ‘I’, treating this as what Kathleen Fraser calls an innovative necessity. Indeed, this holds even beyond a Gurlisque. There are a number of experimental women poets (major names like Denise Riley and Kathleen Fraser among them) who, “while writing experimentally, opted to retain forms of lyrically expressive ‘I’-ing in order to challenge the abstract, ostensibly genderless linguistic-conceptual signifiers which had come to typify an established avant-garde” (Murray 2011:18). However, nor is this simply to ‘claim’ the authority of the ‘I’ as undisputed. Consider: the singular ‘I’ was preferred by Second Wave feminism in its advocating for the powerful expression of previously-unarticulated and unheard female voices. The dominant modes of early feminist female writing demanded “the immediately accessible language of personal experience” (Fraser 2000: 31) as this coincided with the emphasis on the expression of personal-political ‘women’s’ content. The expressive personal lyric poem was considered “a place for self-expression, for giving a true account, for venting rage, and for embracing sexual love of women” (Fraser 2000: 31-2). In a Gurlisque poetics, though, we tend to encounter more protean takes on female agencies, often revelling in contradiction, and controversial in articulating versions and perversities of desire and embodiment. Lidia Curti discusses “the encounter between feminism and postmodernism” as unsettled and unsettling. In the space of two pages she characterises this relationship as “the *confrontation* of feminism with postmodernism” (1998:1) and the “*shared* discourse of feminism and postmodernism” (Page 2, my emphases). Subsequently, she clarifies this as the “controversial relation between feminism and postmodernism”, explaining that “it has been the *and* dividing, or uniting, them that has been put in question” (80), because this ‘and’ might indicate, variously, “a complicity, an addition, a simple juxtaposition”, so that “it would be more accurate to substitute” for ‘and’ a variety of different words, depending on contexts of use and intention. In other words, the relationship between feminism and postmodernism far exceeds the

parameters of facile binary: it entails a range of “‘intertwining’, ‘crossing’, ‘antagonising’, ‘including’ or ‘excluding’” (80-81). This makes for confusion, yes. But the very unease, she suggests, has *valuably* given rise to debates which struggle against “artificial oppositions” and supposedly “fixed, unmovable divisions” (1) in respect of the boundaries which were assumed to delimit genres, genders, cultural forms, linguistic discourses.

Relevant to my discussion of Gurllesque poetics as drawing on varied interanimations of female, feminine and feminist is that such debates have occurred “in the analyses both of popular literature and television and of contemporary experimentation in women’s writing” (1). She notes the volatile forms of these debates about the “discourse of difference” (2), seeing “swings in the theoretical pendulum, giving emphasis now to essentialism, now to anti-essentialism”, a movement of thought and idea that is not to be seen as fickle, but as *successfully* “signalling a multiplicity of positions, each of them traversed by many nuances and contradictions” (2). In this mobile theoretical context, we can expect to see “the decline of a strong, steady undivided subjectivity”; “the refusal of canonised forms”; “the opposition to a morality of consensus” – all “creating a space for dissent” in which “distinctions between subject and object, centre and margins, sameness and difference...are blurred and uncertain” (2). This is the scene in which Gurllesque feminisms and performances of ‘self’ need to be located, for a Gurllesque poet may revel in the *potent* play of contradictions, instead of asserting the coherently affirmative (even oppositional) political female subjectivity advocated by earlier forms of feminism.

The ‘I’ of a Gurllesque poem is likely to resist singularity, chafing against a reader’s conventional desire, for instance, to assume that the voice expressed in a poem is that of the female poet ‘herself’. Instead, a Gurllesque poem might refuse to narrow the differential gap, insisting on the difference between a poet’s material experience and the making of meaning in the material space of the poem *as* a linguistic performative construct which may exhibit varieties of playful, affective, subversive, or affirmative intent. If a Gurllesque poet perceives that there is no single, coherent Female identity and that her ‘I’ is plural ‘I’s’, multiple views and eyes and experiences which can be experimented with even in the process of making the poem, then Glenum’s suggestion regarding what the Gurllesque is doing as a poetics is persuasive: “their work assaults the norms of acceptable female behavior by irreverently deploying gender stereotypes to subversive ends” (2001: 11).

Look at an example from Arianna Reines’s second collection, *Coeur de Lion* (2011). The poems in this collection have no titles, escaping the neatly contained moments associated with lyric insight; the volume seems to be one long poem, a prose-like form expansively

breaching codes of individual poetic voicing, proliferating into multiples whose borders are impossible to determine with certainty, but which, because the material is otherwise confusing, invite division here, or here, or...there? Voice in this collection is continually renewed: the address may be via the first person 'I', but the constant (re)iteration has the effect not of endorsing a singular, coherent self, but of drawing attention to 'I' as a performative drafting and processual re-working. This is a subjective on-goingness, a perplexingly but necessarily unfinished becoming that refutes the personality-infused expressive agentive 'I' of traditional lyric confessionalist poetry.

Now that I am not addressing you
 But the 'you' of poetry
 I am probably doing something horrible and destructive.
 But this 'I' is the I of poetry
 And it should be able to do more than I can do.
 I think it would make me uncomfortable
 To have poems address themselves to me.
 I think that it is old-fashioned
 A kind of aggressive defacement
 The love poem.

(2014: 15)

Paradoxically, given its relentless, unbroken sequence, *Coeur de Lion* is a 'break-up' poem, charting the end of a love relationship. But the "book-length epistolary love poem" (2014: np) plays against the intimacy and confessionalism habitually associated with lyric romanticism, complicating any assumed "direct [...] address" to "a recently lost 'you'" (2014: np). The poet uses a canny position-cum-re-positioning of pronouns, pulling closer and then drawing away, all the while locating the expressive 'I' as a conscious *device* which shakes up the personal as well as stages the poem space as inventive rather than mimetic. Reines demonstrates here that she is appropriating "the love poem" in order to address not (only) an actual 'you' but the "'you' of poetry". She finds the act of her writing to be "horrible and destructive" and yet necessary: 'I' has been damaged in love, and in the love lyric, 'I' remains to be ground down, almost destroyed. It is true that even this Gurlisque writing harbours a nostalgic yen for the personal power of poetry – but the poet phrases this cunningly, winsomely hoping that the performative 'I' of the poetry may possess an agency that out-reaches the limited, actual 'I' of the self, which seems constatively contained in 'herself'. The volume as a whole, I find, pushes the bounds of lyric towards linguistic-conceptual innovation.

In a conversation with Reines, author Ben Lerner broaches the question of the second person voice. He remarks that it is in the shifts between ‘I’ and ‘you’ that something consequential – and I believe innovative – happens in Reines’s poetry. In *Coeur de Lion*, her strange, long ‘love poem’, she makes “an effort to imagine address as some thing other than an exercise in ironic detachment” and, working through “an aware[ness] of the love poem’s history” without being “disabled by it, not...just demonstrating the tiredness of certain tropes”, to “think about the ‘I’ and ‘you’ as sites for love poems” (Lerner and Reines 2014: 73). This re-thinking is a creative investment in a Gurlesque’s desire to disrupt relations of self and the social. Reines goes on to explain that in this volume, the ‘you’ is one she envisages as “the ‘you’ of YouTube and advertising. It’s really brutalized”. This ‘you’ – imagine ‘yourself’ as ‘you’ are addressed by the screen of an ATM, or by an online survey “comment box” – is a curiously abased version of ‘I’, an “impoverished ‘I’” that is not the subject of intimate address usually associated with love poems, but is rather “just the object of the address of advertising”. The “weird thing”, Reines suggests, is that this “‘you’, like the ‘thou,’ the divine ‘thou,’ isn’t expected to respond, only to buy in. You’re not expected to answer” (Lerner and Reines 2014: 73).

In this way, Reines’s Gurlesque poetry, in its innovations, is also “fundamentally involved with an archaic poetic challenge of being totally individual and totally obliterating individuality”. In the ‘voice’ of the poetry, we find not only the feeling of a personal ‘I’, but a cultural “force that speaks through” the poet. In respect of the relational femaleness that Reines envisages, this is a deliberate volatility: “there’s a you that’s a person that’s a real body that you’re in love with, and also a sense of that being somebody you’re waving beyond” (Lerner and Reines 2014: 75). As complex examples of a Gurlesque, Reines’s poetry makes a case for “the idea that poetry, even though it’s also about addressing whoever is the ostensible person on the other end of the telephone,” is in addition “about opening a channel, about making a space for the possibility of address” (Lerner and Reines 2014: 75). In other words, this version of a Gurlesque brings lyrical and conceptual traditions into adjacency, and in so doing makes a case for the validity of Gurlesque as not some vacuous ‘pop cultural’ phenomenon but a difficult, conflicted compositionality that places forms of romantic self that have been encultured as ‘female’ in conversation. *Coeur de Lion* is a post-Roland Barthes take on the impossibility of writing a lover’s discourse: “these ‘I’s’ of all sorts are some sort of productive modes” (Moore 2009:34). Moore continues: “Reines’s narrating ‘I’ throws images of herself, her former relationship and her poetry headlong towards something” that resembles Slavoj Žižek’s “sublime philosophical speculation...of sexual

practices””, in which the referents more closely function as ‘she’ and ‘he’ than as marks of memoiristic lyrical confessionality. Moore rightly suggests that Reines “revisits the lyric poem in an age where personal emotion laid out by an all-knowing ‘I’ is rarely tolerated” (2009:35), but her phrasing then seems to imply that the ‘I’ of *Coeur de Lion* is omniscient in the conventional autobiographical sense. Far from it. This ‘I’, in Reines’s rampantly reconfigured ‘love lyric’, is an astutely disruptive assemblage of pronoun positions and soundings which renders traditional notions of expressive ‘voice’ precarious. In the course of her review, as it turns out, Moore works her way towards understanding that Reines is questioning the “violence of volitional wholisms” (2009:35), aware that the expressive ‘I’ is suspect rather than authoritative. My view and that of Moore, then, gradually coincide, for she concedes that what she calls Reines’s “fallback to the lyric form” carries the recognition that “without volition, without the private-I, even our most intimate moments must be made into something external”. In other words, “Reines works the boundaries of the contemporary subject” (2009:35), mediating between the Cartesian ideal of a self-productive subject and more current notions of ‘the self’ as necessarily produced in language. She does not settle for a determinate antinomy, but thinks *through* possibilities, as if writing aloud; works her way between the conflicted agencies of ‘the self’ in romantic love, and ‘the self’ – and ‘lover’ – as always necessarily a linguistic-conceptual construct. She refuses to settle for either pole (conceptually pole dancing?), and finding movement in (and between) each, temporarily refusing, and then once again splitting. She tests her writer’s tolerance for the intimate, even erotic, ‘I’ desired by the lyric poem, both wanting it – precisely *as* a form of agency – and also working to couple this with the desirable empowering agency of discursive skepticism. In this I find that she restlessly combines the theoretical and intellectual method of Language/post-L/conceptual writing with the lyrical emotional method of expressive poetry, shaping a challenging form of Gurlisque poetic.

.....I refuse
 To accept some coagulate
 Of other people’s
 Impressions in exchange for this
 Privacy, no matter how flawed it is.
 This is lyric poetry. It has to be. It has
 No other hope.

(*Coeur de Lion*, pages unnumbered)

A (Female) Grotesque

Arielle Greenberg considers the Gurlesque to be an aesthetic which incorporates not only the Burlesque, but the grotesque in its female version. Let me comment on the grotesque, preparing the way for an understanding of a grotesque as a valuable female, even feminist, form of embodied power. As numerous scholars have shown (see for example Bakhtin 1984, Li 2009, Russo 1995, Stallybrass and White 1986) the term ‘grotesque’ as an aesthetic appellation has a complicated history, emerging in different sociocultural contexts to describe architecture, decoration, painting and behavior: ‘ornate’, ‘primitive’, ‘fantastical’, ‘earthy’, ‘fertile’, ‘bizarre’, or ‘deformed’; as ‘debased’, ‘crude’, ‘debauched’, comedic’, ‘excessively physical’, ‘mundane’, ‘stylistically incongruous’. In contemporary popular understanding, the grotesque tends to be a pejorative: to call something ‘grotesque’ is a mark of repulsion; the object or action is disgustingly ugly, revolting. This ‘revolt’, though, can also be considered a political action, because that which is labelled ‘grotesque’ can constitute *a revolt* against constraining norms of ‘proper’ appearance and behavior. The process of this revolt entails both maintaining and disrupting the relationship of that called ‘grotesque’ to norms and to radical alternatives. The grotesque is mobile, because it is an embodiment and practice that dissolves the inherited fixity of centre versus periphery, above and below, reason and emotion, marginalised and dominant. And, even once this has occurred, the grotesque seeks to avoid solidifying into clear form and meaning. I find that this is useful in understanding the volatile varieties of femaleness which feature in many Gurlesque poems. In addition, it speaks to a Gurlesque’s rampant mixing of categories such as creative and critical, or feminine and feminist.

It is perhaps a contradiction in terms to imagine that ‘the grotesque’ can be defined. By nature, it escapes categorisation – which is what makes for the grotesque quality. “Central to the grotesque is its lack of fixity, its unpredictability and its instability” (Connelly 2003:4). Yet as a way to being to understand the possibilities of a Gurlesque poetics as a valuable deformation or re-formation of established poetic practices, it is useful to mention Connolly’s discussion of ‘grotesque’ in the visual arts as taking various forms. There are “those that combine unlikely things in order to challenge established realities or construct new ones; those that deform or decompose things; and those that are metamorphic” (2003:2). When expressed, these grotesques take forms that range “from the wondrous to the monstrous to the ridiculous” (2003:2). Grotesque entails “the aberration from ideal form or from accepted convention to create the misshapen, ugly, exaggerated, or even formless” (2003: 2). Think of the ramifications in respect of the femaleness in which Gurlesque poets are so widely

interested. ‘The Female’ as a grotesque aesthetic provokes a reader to understand that lyric poem, language poem, confessional poem...*why* must these be neatly defined categories? Rather, the grotesque is a creature that haunts the boundaries; it “is in constant struggle with boundaries of the known, the conventional, the understood” (2003:5).

Frances Connolly also reminds us of the contextualised element of interpreting something as grotesque. Often, in their own contexts, objects or practices may be usual and accepted. However, it is due to the power of Western aesthetic codes that once a practice or object crosses from its own into a western context, there ensues a “perceived deformation of European rules of representation” (Connolly 2003:5). This is similar, perhaps, for a Gurlisque poetics, in the ways it challenges the polite expressive poetic norms that tend to have found most favour in academic creative writing and its associated criticism. Linked to this, too, is a female challenge to gendered behavior norms, which *still*, even now, prefer that female sexuality not be threatening, or ‘excessive’, or beyond the pale of social decorum. A Gurlisque poetics takes this big discursive bull by its pointed horn, and turns it into a fantastical unicorn, or a vibrator, or a bejazzled dick, or a fountaining female pen. This is a “metamorphic grotesque” that assists a reader in arriving, through these prolific, jangling image repertoires, at new potential insights, overcoming disunities and incoherences in the imaginative “process” of “‘morphing’ from one thing to another” (Connolly 2003:3). It should be clear that such morphing has potential political import. The unpoetic diction of a Gurlisque poetics, too, its frequent turn to a prose-like speech, colloquial words grabbed from pop culture and splayed disobediently...all of this also is a grotesque troubling of referentiality, inflecting assumed lyric coherence with culturally unbridled voice, with an intemperate slew of lists and a deluge of object references, with an audacious spontaneity that will not be quiet, speaking back to and thus stunning the assumed superiority, in various poetic circles, of such sacred cows as ‘expression’ or ‘poetic art’ or ‘lyric diction’. A Gurlisque poetics tends to have a grotesque temperament when it comes to language, subject matter, and style, and it makes wild use of the various meanings of ‘grotesque’. There is ‘grotesque’ in its diminished and often banal contemporary meanings – ugly, horrible to look at or think about. The grotesque as degenerate. There are also the associations drawn from older cultural traditions, where ‘grotesque’ was dismissed as merely a decorative ornament, an ‘arabesque’ or elaborate, trivial embellishment that deformed the beautiful. The grotesque as Decadent. However, as Connolly insists (and Bakhtin has shown), the word also has a vitality and potency in its association with fecundity and fertility, the primitive, the cacophonous, earthiness, and mystery (2003:9). It is this lively and shifting collocation of

meanings that come into play in the formation of a Gurllesque poetics, where the poets experiment across the possibilities of “the creative and destructive processes of the body” (Connolly 2003: 13).

In an online piece called “Sucking”, Ariana Reines vents sardonically about her first collection *The Cow*. (The title ‘sucking’ may riff off crude sexual innuendo for fellatio, but also cleverly refers to a colloquial expression for supposed failure – you suck! Both meanings a Gurllesque poet might welcome, given the opportunities they offer for broaching femaleness by crossing boundaries of sexual and linguistic play).

I am going to explain why sometimes THE COW speaks clearly and why sometimes it is a voluptuary, a vat of mushy ideals and disgusting feelings. The reason is that I am often a voluptuary, a vat of mushy ideas and disgusting feelings, and I have resented the cleanliness and elegance of tight and perfect writing. I have felt that writing should be dirtier and more excessive. I still feel this way. Often. Not all the time. A person has the right to feel in many different ways.

Writing can be more than good.

<http://www.actionyes.org/issue6/reines/reines-sucking.html>

Here, Reines is very evidently (pro)posing and tongue-in-cheek performing, offering a grotesque aesthetic that enables her to write a preferred form of recalcitrant, challenging femaleness. She shreds notion of the consistency of female self as singularly X (and never ‘properly’ also able to be Y and Z – or L and S, for that matter). As even the flatness of the prose implies – an explanatory where no explanation of ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose’ is possible – she goes rogue on the burden of authenticity that is foisted on women by forcing a parodic correlation between self and feelings, but all the while insisting that the feelings are rampant and a dirty mess, feelings which tumble beyond the neatly finessed bounds of lyric poetic expressivity. She draws attention to the fakery and challenges of normative poetic conventions in shrugging off – by perversely taking on – the premise of confessional secrecy and revelation as really no big deal revelation at all.

Grotesque Language

For the moment, let me focus on the way in which Gurllesque poets could be said to use unremarkable or ordinary language and subjects to embody the grotesque impulse. The short article “Aesthetics: Feminism’s Hidden Impact” may be suitable in discussing the

shapes of a grotesque everyday aesthetic. In the article, which deliberates forms of feminism as/and aesthetics, Carolyn Korsmeyer suggests that “everyday aesthetics shifts attention away from contexts that are special and isolated from ordinary life, as concepts of fine art sometimes mandate, and directs it to the real circumstances in which one lives” (2013: 9). Here, “[p]utting pleasure at the center is a key tactic. Flirting with the pornographic, or the horrifying, or the crass, these poets exploit the energy of sexual effrontery wherever they find it. The aim is not to shock the elders, but to underscore a liberating tendency that only a few of the previous generation recognized, at least publicly” (Fischer 2011:np). As I see it, this enables me to emphasise that the Gurlisque poets do not dispel attention to aesthetic questions in their work but, rather, that in a variant of a spirit by now familiar across a range of artistic-expressive movements (from Dada to the postmodern), they turn to an “everyday aesthetics” to manage concepts like the female grotesque. An example of this grotesquerie – explicitly in respect of content niceties but also when it comes to inelegant (dis/graceful?) diction and syntax, is Ariana Reines’s *Mercury*. Below is an excerpt:

When I am on all fours and I have to pee and he has to pee and he fucks me the
tension in our bellies and the blood in our middles makes us have to be what we are.

Tits in the mirror like the bulges under the golden fleece.

A face doesn't have to mean anything, everything is too much and whatever it breaks
is where something true will have had to have happened and will have.

Unified substance

(2009: np)

This poem offers an intentional play on notions of aesthetics which may be tied to Carolyn Korsmeyer’s concept of “everyday aesthetics”. The excerpt itself is quite complex. In the first stanza, Reines begins by using plain language, however, ends with simple language becoming obfuscating in the claim, “makes us have to be what we are”. The phrasing is clumsy, and implies the challenge of representing coherent identity, as much as it is desired. Simultaneously, while the ‘us’ and the ‘we’ are conscious of the performative aspects of this fleeting sexual unity, both the speaker and the “he” are unable completely to avoid being who they are, *what* they are, even via the collective shift in experience embodied by sex. The third stanza seems to be trying to grapple with conceptual thoughts of identity and its ‘truth’. It could be said that the speaker is aware that identity is never clear or completely defined because “everything is too much”. All is in excess of the neat definitions of self, and bounded

identities. The last line could then be seen as a juxtaposition to the previous line. The “unified” of “what we are” contrasts with “everything is too much” and the inconsistency of “something true will have had to have happened and will have”. Again, note the poet’s use of very convoluted expression here, which attests to the difficulties of entanglement. In her scholarly work, Glenum gives insight into this, saying that “the concept of the pure lies at the heart of Western aesthetics - the word ‘catharsis’ comes from the Greek verb ‘to purify’”. If, in traditional Aristotelian aesthetic theory, the ‘catharsis’ is the purgative process of releasing strong emotions, of providing purifying relief at a crucial moment in narrative or other artistic plotting, the messy everyday aesthetics of a Gurlesque poetics reminds us, in trying to offer a poetic-conceptual embodiment of this aesthetic in poetry, that Western culture is also premised on an emotionally and socially repressed force, in that “women, non-whites, queers, impoverished, or disabled persons” have all (admittedly with different overlaps, distinctions and intensities), “historically been labeled as social contaminants”(Glenum 2009: 18).

This puts women in a strange position in regard to aesthetics. If they are ‘social contaminants’ how can they ever reach the imagined purity of aestheticism? It is in keeping with the foundational refusals of traditional aesthetic discourses – contorted, debilitating, from the outset defining femaleness as impossible lack – that Glenum motivates for an understanding of a Gurlesque as a *strategic* debasement of the aesthetic norms that would prefer to see women – especially their ownership of sexual agency - endlessly pushed to the margins. Many Gurlesque poets, then, elect to *occupy* the liminal, rather than obeying the (impossible) demand, for female writers, of achieving the ideal state. “Gurlesque poets deny catharsis because they deny the aesthetics of the pure” (2001: 18).

Additionally relevant is Korsmeyer’s point that “traditional [aesthetic] theory maintains that true [artistic] appreciation is free from physical gratification” (2013: 10). Indeed, both the writing and the appreciation are elevated to transcendent imaginative states, at a superior remove from the earthbound banality of the mundane. However, in their often graphic insistence on embodiment, pushing the limits of poetic description beyond the subject matters and norms of ‘properly’ poetic content and diction, Gurlesque poets such as Reines offer a loud, almost Dionysian rebuke of the Apollonian dictates of traditional theories of creation and reception. (I don’t wish to be side-tracked into contention, but the scholar who comes to mind here is Camille Paglia. While her claims have attracted criticism, she suggests that the “quarrel between Apollo and Dionysus is the quarrel between the higher cortex and the older limbic and reptilian brains” [1990:96], and she contends that an orderly, classical

Apollonian culture has long set itself up as the opposite of the wild and dark Dionysian chthonic impulse associated with femaleness, procreation, and the unbounded chaotic.)

In the Reines's poem discussed above, note also the poet's ambit of reference, ranging from the inescapable physicality of the biological body to aspects of female embodiment as linguistically represented in colloquial discourse – "tits" – *and* through invocation of classical Greek mythology. In effect, the poet brings into the same space a rampantly carnivalesque series of discourses, high and low, upsetting the preferred critical distance which has dominated Western aesthetic tradition and, in the process, *celebrating* femaleness as precisely the supposed contaminated perversity to which it has been mistakenly reduced by more remote, transcendent, idealizing aesthetic modes. The woman and the man, in the poem, are indeed *both* in a situation which exposes them, has them shed refined human niceties. Sex "makes us have to be what we are". The result of this, it seems, in the world of the poem, is a dialectical harmony, a unity of desiring impulses created by and within the experience of chaotic pleasure. In this invocation of a "Unified substance", the poem shifts from a graphic depiction of sexual embodiment, gesturing unevenly towards a more metaphysical realm, perhaps so as to persuade a reader to accept a binarised aesthetics of *both/and*, rather than *either/or*, whether cerebral/visceral, or male/female. In "Mercury", Reines refuses to deny the sometimes almost animalised physical pleasure a woman may take in her female body, the very animality creating, in sex, a reciprocity that may produce a oneness, a shared transmogrification into a being beyond the individuated self. She also suggests that in this earthy animal conjoining ("on all fours"), the human face – at once an important mark of the species, and of individual's human distinctiveness – can be momentarily stripped of its oppressive and limiting definitional authority, sex enabling a startling reminder of human being as anonymous animality, rather than always freighted with intimacy, tenderness, even the sentimental attachment of the 'loved one' and his/her face. I also notice, in this poem, beyond the deliberate coarseness of the language and vocabulary, a roughness in the syntax, almost a disorientating clumsiness. Consider, for example:

everything is too much and whatever it breaks is where something true will have had to have happened and will have.

Unified substance

In the first section, the line is long, insistently pushing forward, breathlessly without pause. The sense of embodiment, of bodies in sexual action, is vividly recreated, a process in which

‘sense’ and coherence are, if not quite suspended or forgone, subsidiary and contingent. The syntax is clotted and unsettled; a compounded coagulation of future perfect tense and past tense, blurring pastness and futurity. The ‘logic’ of the idea is difficult to follow, even the a-specific references of “everything” and “something,” “whatever” and “wherever,” and the use of modal auxiliary verbs. The line proves disorientating, and coaxing a re-reading: “whatever it breaks is where something true will have had to have happened and will have.”. The sense is further complicated in that the verb phrase is uncompleted: in “and will have” – the ‘happened’ is implied, rather than stated. The punctuation, too, is quirky. The end-stop period after the third ‘have’ invites an understanding of closure. There is a finality to the idea and the action. And yet the subsequent phrase “Unified substance” seems grammatically to follow, upsetting the full stop. In the lines, the timeframe of the action or state of being is uneasy, at once completed and yet with the feeling of being deferred. Clearly, the poet plays with a reader’s expectations of closure, and perhaps of fulfillment, the expectation that, after the relentless thrust, a space of settled and “Unified substance” will have been achieved. Even in these two brief lines, we see the poet working cannily between physical embodiment and the intellectually abstract play of puzzling ideas. The flexible category of the grotesque, transposed into a Gurlesque poetry, offers mixed and even mangled mutations of bricolage, unlikely combinations of language and lyric image, of self and the structures of the social, which can be horrifying, but which may also function as caricature (Connelly 2003: 2). The grotesque cannot be constrained by the laminate perfection of conventional aesthetic categories. A poetics of the grotesque entails flux and liminality, rather than an abiding by the ideal. A grotesque prefers to teeter on the “permeable boundary between ideal and monstrous, illusion and distortion” (Connelly 2003:13). In other words, a Gurlesque poetics draws on “the modalities of the grotesque to create a radically anti-aesthetic approach” to the imagery (13-14) and classical norms of poetic and female beauty. Such an approach is “concrete” rather than abstract; it is “disjunctive, polysemous, excessive and contingent” (Connelly 2003:14) and finds its *métier* in a repeated turn to the complications of female embodiment, often as sexual encounter, but also in terms of female sexuality more broadly as a category which mediates the beingness of being female.

Indeed, some of the Gurlesque poets imply that aesthetic appreciation may coincide with physical gratification, in the sense that the mind, as the supposed location of aesthetic pleasure, is *also* part of ‘the body’ rather than some rational, separate, higher-order sphere. Similarly, the implication is that the visceral (guts) is not somehow a debased corporeal, and nor is the emotionally affective (heart) inevitably the site of twee sentimentality or

romanticism. All interconnect and thus, co-constitute important elements of an aesthetics that therefore is not a remote idea or abstraction. “Gurlesque poets out the unabashed quest for female pleasure at the center of their poetics” (Glenum 2002: 8). They manipulate and subvert more classical aesthetic ideologies, especially through female bodies as subject and as embodied in language. Glenum explains:

In Gurlesque poetry, human bodies and human language (and thus, identity) are not closed, discrete systems. They are grotesque bodies/systems – never finished ever morphing, unstable, and porous. The body as the nexus of language and identity, is a strange borderland, the site of erratic and highly specific (and language-mediated) desires.

(2002: 7)

Glenum’s proposal implies that in Gurlesque poetry, we can expect to encounter a complex multiplicity of female embodiment, since an uncompromising openness to and of female bodies is needed in this emergent poetics, as an aesthetic tactic. She presents to her reader the notion that a female body, understood as always open, is thus constantly being constructed and defined, again and again, since bodies as part of language systems are unstable, and susceptible to repeated re-definition in the individual discourses of different female poets. Part of the poem “Navel Gazing” by Geraldine Kim^{xiv} may serve as an example of this:

I’m a memory
a list feeling
a lost feeling
a list poem
I’m a duo yet
I’m a dirty slut
I’m a figure
silhouette breaking apart
the identifiers of style
everything I’s fiction
dishonesty paramount

(2014: np)

This poem is accompanied by an interview with Kim subtitled “All the Feminist Poets”, and the interviewer’s first question concerns why Kim considers a poem she has called “Naval Gazing” to be feminist. Kim answers: “ ‘I’ can’t un-female. It’s an identity that’s pasted upon ‘me,’ even in utero”, just as one cannot simply slip out of one’s race for the process of a

poem. She goes on to say that in her poetry she is intrigued “to figure out ways of exploring what it means to be female—or even to just be a person—to complicate what is ‘I’ without falling prey to social mythologies of what ‘I’ should be, while at the same time acknowledging that ‘I’ am shaped by those same mythologies, regardless of my dis/likes” (2014: np). It seems Kim and Glenum are working around similar notions of female identity as Kim writes “I’m a figure/ silhouette breaking apart” and Glenum suggests that our bodies are “a strange borderland” where “erratic and highly specific (and language-mediated) desires” must run rampant. As Glenum claims, the “I” is “raucously messy nest of conflicting desires and proclivities []...Disjunctions in identity [are to be] savored and tapped for their cultural power” (2001: 13), not disciplined into single, coherent, obedient shape. The poet chooses to unbind herself from and commit herself to, as Kim puts it, “what the ‘I’ is without falling prey to social mythologies of what the ‘I’ should be” especially in terms of female embodiment and the convoluted expression of femaleness (<http://weird-sister.com/2014/11/14/all-the-feminist-poets-geraldine-kim/>).

If, as Glenum suggests, bodies are always open, does this not also apply to language? Language is a received structure of codes and conventions, vocabulary and standard practices, which is nevertheless also fluid, mobile, constantly shifting to accommodate new words, rhythms, phrasings. For Glenum, both human bodies and human language are “grotesque bodies”, “systems” that are yet “porous”. She implies that the two are co-implicated, in convoluted ways. (Does language create the gendered codes of our bodies or do our bodies, and their functions, create the language of gendered codes?) The body is seen by Glenum to be a significant site for the formation of language; the body is “the nexus of language and identity,” a “strange borderland” where the body seeps into language and identity. In keeping with the shifting referents of language understood as play and ploy rather than simple designator, the self’s body is the selves’ bodies, multiple, moving in multiple directions like “a memory/ a list feeling/ a lost feeling/ a list poem/ I’m a duo yet”. Contemporary scholars of an experimental feminism as it relates to embodiment might agree. In *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, for example, edited by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn, the essays limn “the borders of the obscene, the pleasurable, the desirable and the hitherto unspoken, rethinking sexuality anew as deeply and strangely sexy”, putting tangibility and touch back into the abstractions of theory, and even of ‘the body’ and ‘Desire’.

In grotesque aesthetic practices, as Bakhtin points out in his work on grotesque realism, the refined, symmetrical Classical bodily canons of the dominant classes – the

nobility and subsequently the bourgeoisie - are challenged by a disruptive, popular, carnivalesque understanding of bodies. (For the purpose of my discussion of a developing Gurllesque aesthetics, it should be clear that the label 'dominant class' may be extrapolated to established cultural norms as circulated and confirmed by an academic poetic establishment and a publishing industry which give preferred currency to expression that is recognizable 'as Poetry'. This entails rewarding received poetic norms such as emotionally epiphanic voicing, relevant subject matters, and emotionally-affective lyric expressivity). The carnivalesque – of which I am arguing a Gurllesque poetics is an example - re-positions bodies as necessarily vulgar, excessive uncontrollable, irregular, volatile and morphing, precisely because they eat, defecate, have sex, accumulate fluids and leak. Again, I hold that this is true, for a Gurllesque poetics, especially in respect of the poets unabashed treatment of female embodiment. There is an extensive scholarship, in feminist and gender studies, that figures the carnivalesque as a mode of representation specifically towards a female grotesque that, located in women's gendered bodies as disruptive and uncontrollable, and offers a powerful political-ideological form of subversion (eg see for example Zimon Davis 1975). Some even point to the paradox of the term: Mary Russo, for instance, in her study *The Female Grotesque. Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1991), "notes that the idea of female grotesque might be a tautology, since femininity is [already] defined against masculine norms and hence always [as inherently] deviant" (Osterholm 2016:113).

The carnival spirit of the grotesque serves to permit inventive freedom, and innovative, unexpected combinations of disjunctive elements. This rips away entrenched world views and normative truths, shakes up cliché and assumed proprieties. As Bakhtin says, this carnivalesque of the material body entertains "a completely new order of things" and reveals "the relative nature of all that exists" (Bakhtin 1984: 34). This view may be too casually celebratory, too idealised. (One man's carnival is another woman's rape?) But in terms of a *poetics*, the grotesque body's transgressive and potentially transformative energies can offer a Gurllesque poet an inspirational corrective to chilly classical aesthetic norms of poetic diction, formal balance, coherent syntax, epiphanic closure and the like. Briefly consider Arian Reines's remarks concerning her collection *The Cow*, comments which mine the serious artistic purpose and coherence of A Manifesto. In writing *The Cow*, these are her express intentions:

1. To use a cliché [namely, 'the cow']. To employ religious texts, veterinary manuals, literary works, wikipedia, and internet detritus in the service of opening this cliché.

2. To make a book capable of humiliating itself, capable of arousing itself inside its own violence and difficulty, like a Marina Abramovic performance.
3. To make a book that is an organ. An organ is something that things pass through: it makes substances and is permeated by what it makes, or it receives substances and transmits them or translates them. Sometimes books act like events, like edifices, or like they can tell it like it is. Telling it like it is is always also a lie, but it feels total. People will always thank you for your extremity.... Sometimes it is factually and rigorously impossible to tell it like it is, and that is not because of some relativism or soft-headed deconstruction, that is because some things are many things at once, and this is exhausting and terrifying, and very important. Books must understand this in their very making.
4. To construct the book out of different lengths and registers of text. A single style clobbers you with its totality. A single form does the same. The book should exceed itself, crack open, empty out, exceed itself.

<http://www.actionyes.org/issue6/reines/reines-sucking.html>

All of these goals exemplify Mary Russo's argument, that a female grotesque, in hazing distinctions between ugliness and beauty (both of content and of form), and in deliberately de-generating proprieties of proportion and restraint, is not merely an aesthetic move, some indulgent artistic ploy to be sneered at by those for whom art and style are inherently always superfluous to The Political. Rather, the female grotesque may "suggest new political aggregates – provisional, uncomfortable, even conflictual, coalitions of bodies which both respect the concept of 'situated knowledges' and refuse to keep every body in its place" (Russo 1995: 179). A Gurlisque poetics, like theorist Elizabeth Grosz, gives especial attention to the question of 'volatile bodies' and the importance of understanding embodied subjectivity. A Gurlisque poetics treats female bodies not as a 'natural', ahistorical or pre-cultural entities that precede cultural inscription, but as produced in and through culture. For Grosz, the 'body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural and geographical inscriptions, production or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, the cultural product" (1994: 23) and in such production lies also the capacity for a reworking of culturally 're-productive' norms. As a Gurlisque poetics illustrates, if the openness and incompleteness of female bodies attract the forces of social ordering, control and surveillance which would constrain them towards preferred forms and mores, it also enables them to dispute the boundaries that would contain and control them, taking and making of 'female' a further, exceptional *exception* to the social's narrow exceptionalist definitions (Grosz 1994).

None of this is simple; none of this entails a clear opposition of x and y, with the clear and settled result of z, where Feminism eliminates Femininity and resolves into Femaleness. As Lidia Curti remarks, “[t]he accumulation and overflow of bodies and languages, the elements of proliferation” in a female grotesque can function as “oneiric fantasises of compensation for the vanishing of stable singular identities”. It can sometimes function “for the continuation of an oppressive condition”, and it can “be a derisive counterpoint to the stereotypes of the feminine” or to “notions of heterosexual love” or to “the expression of that subconscious that first dilates the strong subject in caricature and then erases it, and with it our nostalgia for the recovery of a strong subjectivity” (1998:107). What we can expect in forms of Gurllesque tendency, then, viewed through the bewildering optic of a female grotesque, is “anarchy of genres” and “contamination among different...modes: critical and creative writing, high and low, popular and avant-garde, real and fantastic” (Curti 1998:108).

British experimental poet Denise Riley, in an article entitled “Does Sex Have A History? ‘Women’ and Feminism” (1987) poses the question: “Can anyone fully inhabit a gender without a degree of horror? How could someone ‘be a woman’ through and through, make a final home in that category without suffering claustrophobia – or hysteria?” A powerful question. It seems that the women poets working with the Gurllesque are continually trying to tackle this question in their poetics. This significant feature of the female grotesque appears in both the poetry *and* in the poets’ critical writing. Glenum begins her essay “Notes on Women and the Grotesque” by writing that:

If I am a woman, my speech is colonized by eggs and tubes, I bulge with fetuses or fat, with meaty slops, my multiple orifices clamoring. I leak corrosive fluids. My body is labeled a grotesque body, what Bakhtin calls, “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.”

(2010: np)

The way in which Glenum is writing her female body can be said to be grotesque, especially using phrases like “I bulge with fetuses or fat” and “my multiple orifices clamoring”. It is clear that a Bakhtinian view of her body is at hand. However, the point is not merely that the body is open, but that the body is not *just* open. It is also not finished, not complete. What Glenum is asserting seems to be that the female body displays an excess of itself, which has historically been set as a debased feature of femaleness, but which can also be re-characterised, in a Gurllesque discourse, as powerful re-appropriation, a refusal of constrained

boundaries. Consider Ariana Reines' poem "Blowhole", with which the Greenberg and Glenum *Gurlesque* anthology opens. In this piece, and unnamed female figure is seen to exhibit a grotesque bodily porousness: "SHE say when she drink liquid it leak into her sinuses...So he BROKE her eyes she face brain...Liquid shoot into her skull and leak out her eye hole" (27). Krieger makes a substantial argument, suggesting that "although *Gurlesque* poets' grotesque depictions of female bodies could be viewed as unfavorable, degrading, or even exploitative of women, the utterly nonplussed tone of their poems defies such a reading by envisioning women as ultimately unconquered by their attackers and almost comically unfazed by their own physical vulnerability" (2012:92). In their poetics, "*Gurlesque* gives us the everyday in all its messy anti-glory, a quotidian procession of female bodies coming into contact with clothing, food, commerce, media, men, children, each other—all in graphic detail." (Fischer 2011: np). For a *Gurlesque* poet, there is too much body and everything is pushed onto the outside. In Margaret R. Miles's chapter "Carnal Abominations", she suggests similarly that:

The special affiliation of the female body with the grotesque is founded on the assumption that the male body is the perfectly formed, complete, and therefore normative body. By contrast, all women's bodies incorporate parts (like breasts, uterus, and vagina) and processes (like menstruation and pregnancy) that appear[ed] grotesque...

(1989: 155)

If the regular dictionary definition of grotesque is "comically or repulsively ugly or distorted" with a secondary interpretation being "incongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree", one could say that women poets working in the *Gurlesque* aesthetic appropriate such definitions, using the grotesque to assault "the norms of acceptable female behavior by irreverently deploying gender stereotypes to subversive ends" (Glenum 2009:11). If we regard what Miles suggests as a stereotype of the grotesque, then it seems entirely plausible that these poets are working to subvert notions of the female body as grotesque. A useful example of my argument can be found in Donika Kelly's "When she is opened. When she is closed":

When he opens her chest, separates the flat skin
of one breast from the other, breaks the hinge of ribs,
and begins, slowly, to evacuate her organs, she is silent.

He hollows her like a gourd, places her heart
below her lungs, scrapes the ribs clean of fat
and gristle with his thick fingers. He says, Now you are ready,

and climbs inside. But she is not ready for the dry bulk
of his body curled inside her own. She is not ready to exhale
his breath, cannot bear both him and herself,

but he says, Carry me, and she carries him beneath her
knitted ribs, her hard breasts. He is the heart now,
the lungs and stomach that she cannot live without.

(2011: np)

I have included the entire poem here courtesy of Kelly's website (<http://donikakelly.com/poetry/>). Donika Kelly is a black American poet whose debut collection, *Bestiary*, was released in 2016. She is also an academic, holding both a Master of Fine Arts in Writing and a doctorate in English from Vanderbilt University. Although she does not seem to be well-known, she is an exceptional poet and I propose that some of her poetry could be said to contain "Gurlesque tendencies". One could say that the tendency occurs by way of the female grotesque in the poem above. First of all, it must be said that Kelly does not use the lyrical or confessional 'I' but rather uses the third-person omniscient voice. This may be to display both 'she' and 'he' without the overt subjectivity of the first-person 'I'.

The speaker seems to be observing the desecration of the woman's body. The woman is silent and remains so. Her silence might be interpreted as a mark of obedience. Although she is not ready for "for the dry bulk/of his body curled inside her own" or "to exhale/his breath" or "bear both him and herself", she does not do anything when he "hollows her like a gourd", scrapes the ribs clean of fat/and gristle with his thick fingers". She allows her body to be torn (separates the flat skin/of one breast from the other") and broken apart ("breaks the hinge of ribs"). Interestingly, the speaker does not always say *her* ribs, *her* skin, or *her* breasts. It seems that she is depersonalising the 'she'. Why? I propose that Kelly uses the speaker in this way to make the grotesque of the female body seem even more unsettling. The 'she' seems to have no 'I' and no personalisation. She is just a body. Her organs, whatever has made her a woman, have been deconstructed and reassembled by and for the 'he'. The way in which the 'he' interacts with the female body of the 'she' makes this poem disconcerting and incongruous and suggests a form of Gurlesque poetics that emphatically demonstrates how "the styling of female flesh entails the manufacture of monsters" (Glenum

specific idea, I will begin with the poet, Ariana Reines. She is one of the poets who is repeatedly mentioned as a ‘landmark’ for Gurlisque poetry. In “Blowhole”, as Krieger remarks, “Reines’s poetic narration...maintain[s] a detached, matter-of-fact quality even while delivering...blush-worthy lines” (2012: 92): “Because of remembering where or what you are the ovum gasp and burst. First he spit on my asshole then start in with a middle finger and then the cock slid in no sound come out, only a maw gaping, grind hard into ground. Voluminous bounty of minutes sensate and glowing shoot out”. Such lines could be seen as “subverting classical stereotypes of feminine beauty involving uniformity and permanence, but also counter conventional conceptions of the female mind, emphasizing psychological strength and whimsy over emotional fragility and self-seriousness” (Krieger 2012: 93) It could be said that Reines revels in the female grotesque, performing her position as a female body to subversive ends. In the poem, the woman is not silent; she is quite blasé in her sexuality, almost pleasuring in the explicit language, which has a curiously prosaic quality that rubs the pornographic up against the erotic, but without overplaying either impulse. In “Blowhole”, it seems this speaker has ownership over her ‘I’, wallowing in it sensually, in ways not conventionally appropriate for femaleness. In the last stanza of “Blowhole”, the speaker says “Thick book like his fat head when I sit on it and fart”. This entails multiple kinds of a female grotesque. Firstly, the female ‘I’ (the speaker) seems to be in a dominant position given that her body is directly on top of the man’s. Secondly, this female ‘I’ shows agency by acting without being told how to behave. Thirdly, the female speaker “farts” during sex, expressing a culturally-inappropriate bodily excess, an excess of either decorum or even that which is considered sexually desirable, in a female. This speaker speaks through more than merely her mouth orifice; she seems to hold no reservations about the ‘unladylike’ behaviour that she is performing. She knows that the fart, linguistically inexpressive, is nevertheless culturally intelligible as a refusal of norms. This is in keeping with a Gurlisque tendency to “draw on destructive energies to perform their social critique” (2009: np).

The last poem that I will explore incorporates both the physical grotesque of the female body and the grotesque of a new female ‘I’. The poem is called “today I watched a porn from Japan where a girl in a straw, blonde wig” and is part of a collection that I would like to introduce. Francine J. Harris is an African-American poet and academic on her second collection, *play dead*. This is the collection in which I find the aforementioned poem. This poem is about, as the title tells, the speaker watching a Japanese pornography with one woman and a “gang of men”. However shocking, to some readers, in watching pornography from Japan, the speaker of “today I watched a porn from Japan” is performing a

contemporary cliché. Watching pornography, whether male or female, is not uncommon, even if watching a pornographic film specifically from *Japan* tends to be associated with practices still considered especially strange, obscure or outrageous in the West. (Japanese porn is infamous for having few boundaries in terms of taboo sexual acts; the stereotype of ‘tentacle porn’ comes to mind.) In the poem, a reader is reading in the first person of the speaker as self and desire channeled through the first and only instance of ‘I’. The scene has been set and the speaker is vocally performing a burlesque fantasy of identification in which ‘I’ is emptied and disappears into the abject (disem)body of the woman being vibrated. Perverse? Perhaps. This is female sexuality in all its polymorphous perversity, from which a Gurllesque poet does not shy away.

The title line is also the beginning of the body of the poem. The speaker says “today I watched a porn from Japan where a girl in a straw, blonde wig/is picked up in an unmarked minivan, taken to a warehouse, tied up/and vibrated./Severely vibrated” (Harris 2016: 72). The different words relating to “vibrate” are used twelve times in the space of a seventeen-line poem. Describing the woman in the poem, the speaker remarks “tits out, red underwear, and a gang of men wearing black gloves vibrate her”. The next time we hear about the woman is at the end of the poem when “...her body full of vibrators and vibrators/and vibrators. On camera/she passes out./One of them wakes her/ with a black, gloved finger”. First of all, it is clear that the poet is using repetition in order to make the reader aware of her meaning. What is her meaning of repeating “vibrate/vibrator”? Harris makes her readers aware of how grotesque the pornography the speaker is witnessing is. But it is also the vibrators that she makes grotesque, as fake versions of the phallus which, by analogy, is denuded of power. This is keenly grotesque. The penis has been replaced by an object that does not have a body. The male body has been reduced to a penis, which has been reduced to a vibrator.

The woman is scarcely described; it is only her anonymous female orifices as sites of potential vibration that are necessary. ‘She’ is otherwise not needed. Upon first reading, one might say that the impersonal lack of description and the focus on the barrage of penetrative sexual acts show the poet asserting the male violence, and that of patriarchal industries such as porn, that is being wrought upon this female body in particular and The Female Body in general. The woman is simply serving an illustrative purpose. Her body is not hers at all. She is barely herself. She is orientalist in the service of a global sex industry which desperately strives for further and further exotic possibilities, in the face of limits to the potential forms of porn, and the unlimited perversity of people’s sexual desire. There is some persuasiveness in

this opinion. However, the poem also entails such a hyperbolic, “calculated excess” that, even in this extreme porn violence-cum-pleasure, Harris subverts any insistence on a material reading of the poem situation as one of verisimilitude. She persistently draws attention not only the spectacle of watching, but to the inflated spectacle of the performance, and the further magnification and intensification of the event in the situation of the poem. The poem is littered with campy over-exaggerations. The mechanical repetition of the vibrators as instruments which carry the poet’s thought demonstrates this, as the image keeps changing. There are first “tons of vibrators”, then “two, then four, then six vibrators”, and later “a duct-taped machine/of a gross of vibrators”. These vibrators also look obscure being “long, white, bulbous” and “big, fathead”. Then they look like “pop mics”, “aliens” and “potato heads”. Although these can all be seen as grotesque images, it also seems that “pop mics”, “aliens” and “potato heads” might be seen as “girly kitsch”. The three images seem distanced from the space of the poem. For instance, “potato heads” could pertain to the *Toy Story* toy character. “Pop mics” evokes the microphones used by young, teenaged singstars. “Aliens” are what vibrators could look like to a child, for whom such objects are unfamiliar. The images may seem especially grotesque given this disconcertingly young, or childlike vantage point. They are repeated over and over again for effect. The last lines remind the reader again that this is a show or performance (“on camera”), and the poem ends abruptly when the woman “passes out” and one of the men “wakes her/with a black, gloved/finger”. The ending is both violent and banal; a reader is disconcerted. There is no aesthetic satisfaction, no catharsis for the speaker or the reader. The end of the poem is deliberately anticlimactic. The normative porn scenario is shown as grotesque both visually and as a projective affective experience. (I am tempted to adapt Reed’s remarks about Claudia Rankine’s poems in *An American Lyric*, which “describe experiences of quotidian racism that don’t so much generate strong emotions as numb the senses” [2017:27].)

Several Gurlisque poets toy not only with ‘the penis’ as the main member through which male potency has historically been reproduced, but the cultural signifier of male power, the phallus. In a talk given by Ariana Reines in 2009 for the “Holloway Series in Poetry” at Berkeley University (the video archived on YouTube), an audience member asks Reines: “What’s the significance of the cock sucking?” in her poetry. Reines answers:

...somehow the abjection and absurdity of relating to a penis that does not belong to one seems...like it needs to be taken out of this fear of the pornographic...and reinstated into a kind of hilarity or small quizzical oddity that I think it deserves because there’s this...false grandeur with which one is supposed to approach the

‘holy item’....the more one ‘plays with it’ if you will, assuming that it does not belong to one, the more interesting things might become.

(2009: np)

The phallus is deflated, reduced. It becomes less a mark of cultural and political power than simply ‘a penis’, oddly out on a limb. Then, in turn, even the penis is subjected to critical scrutiny. Not: the superior mark of Man. Not: the singular embodiment of Virility. Not: the Eye of God. Rather, ‘the penis’ materializes in Reines’s imaginative recasting as “a small quizzical oddity” stripped of its fearful, exploitative, battering machismo, its self-aggrandising hubris. For this Gurlesque poet, the penis (*a* penis) becomes an object of both female sexual play and female metaphoric refiguration.

ludic
lo dick
low dick
allow dick

for noting:
‘dick’
colloquially
, may mean
‘nothing’
as in
‘He’s got
dick’

In her response, Reines seems to be pondering: can ‘penis’ become other than itself, or more like itself? Penis is...? Pen is? What is it, anyway, this strange, secretive, culturally-taboo ‘thing’? The penis is an embodiment which is not part of a woman’s body yet which is very pointedly a part of a man’s body that, in terms of heteronormative contemporary cultural expectations, is expected to fill a woman’s orifices and thereby properly complete her femaleness as acceptable and desirable. Is that it? In terms of a sexually-experimental Gurlesque poetry, Reines thinks not. Other innovative women poets’ opinions may differ. For my purposes, it is sufficient that an emergent Gurlesque poetic contributes to the difficult conversations about how women, different women, imagine and articulate their bodies. In the poem above, the ‘I’ self is also a collectivity of reception, pushed by a Gurlesque to be recognizable as and to women as a ‘body’ of culturally-traded sexually female familiars. What we see in the poem is Darcy’s assessment of a “Gurlesque poem as “a camped up performance of hyper-*femme* feminism, lush with verbal music and kitsch imagery, which

combines the carnival atmosphere of early burlesque with a disturbingly violent sexuality” (Darcy 2014: 3). As Samantha Pinto might remark, the female body is an archive of the automatic actions of porn, for example, and yet also entails an active reworking of the paradoxical possible and *impossibilities* of sexual actions. The proliferation of vibrators and orifices moves from pleasure to the repetitions of the mechanical, the poem playing out, in its lines and scenario, the predictably *finite* permutations of what mass-mediated sexual desire prefers to present as an endlessly exciting recombinant of bodily versions (2013:180). (Here, we could also re-invoke Reines’s essay “Sucking”, which I have previously cited, and which works with confessionalism as/and error, deliberately over-sharing very intimate personal and family details, almost ‘coming clean’ via public, online confession, as a way of using, abusing and disabusing her audience about the possibilities and limits of self-disclosure. This also, of course, should lead us to think about the space of a poem as one in which self is represented, one in which an intimate personal voicing is assumed to authenticate poetic form and emotion.)

To return to Harris’s poem: though the phallus “does not belong to one” (Reines 2009: np), the repetition of “vibrate/vibrator” and the position of the woman in the poem create a menacing tone with regard to the fake, plastic penises. Some of the descriptions of the “vibrators” may reiterate my argument. The speaker says there are “tons of vibrators. long, white, bulbous, vibrators from the 80’s. big, fathead/vibrators, the kind you can’t get up inside you” (Harris 2016: 72). These descriptions could be said to be hyperbole but they are also easy to recall images. The speaker goes on describing; “First two, then four, then six vibrators./Then a duct-taped machine/of a gross of vibrators./a rope of vibrators” and that they look like “pop mics” and “aliens” and “potato heads”. These last three images could be said to elevate the poem to grotesque “hilarity” because of how ridiculous the signification is. “Pop mics”, “aliens” and “potato heads” are not what one would associate with the phallus. Glenum has suggested that “for centuries if not millennia, men have associated women with the grotesque” and it could be said that Harris is trying to subvert this notion by imagining the phallus as fake, plastic and “a kind of hilarity” and by reminding the reader that it may not be physically attached but it is certain that it is figuratively attached to men in grotesque ways such as the premise of this poem.

Lastly, I would like to explore the grotesqueness of the voyeuristic ‘I’ in this poem. It is not clear whether watching the pornography is consensual; the poem scenario is provocative. Is Harris using the grotesque to give agentive advantage to women, rendering the male characters in her poem grotesque? There seems to be something particularly horrific

and grotesque in the implication that there is an ‘I’ actively watching what is happening to the woman. It is possible that Harris is trying to prompt a discussion about what it means for women to watch pornography, given the prevailing view that a woman watching pornography is involved in the most grotesque act of complicit violation. The poem captures something of this. And yet, on the other hand, the poem also seems to propose that the act of a woman watching pornography is an act of disobedience to society’s gendered roles. This view takes issue with longstanding views which assume not only that women are subject to the male gaze, but that female viewers of film necessarily adopt the male gaze in responding to female characters. Harris’s poem, as I see it, works with more nuance, even with paradox. The poem embodies a kind of Schrodinger conundrum.

The thought experiment of Schrodinger consists of a cat in a steel chamber that has had some radio-active substance released in it. The cat may thus be dead or alive. However in the space of the unknown, the cat is also both. This is a very short and relatively crude understanding of this concept. Nevertheless, the cat as both may be an interesting lens to look at Harris’s own conundrum with. Harris may propose the notion that the female reader is both complicit and disobedient at the same time in the space of her poem. It seems the poem’s manifestation in this sense may occur with relation to the female gaze of pornography. Porn has been reclaimed for us but our relationship to pornography may not ever be simple, even with a category ‘for women’. What if the perceived female audience likes to watch what is taking place in the poem?

It is significant that modes of the female grotesque are being explored, deconstructed and reconfigured in Gurlisque poetry. As Glenum observes, the female grotesque body is “multiple and changing”; it is “identified with non-official ‘low’ culture” and, in posing challenges to received ideas about gendered propriety, it is potentially identified “with social transformation” (Glenum 2011: np). It should be noted, here, that ‘transformation’ is not some simplistic ‘replacement’ process or the substitution of one form of narrowness for another form of supposed progressiveness. Instead, in keeping with notions of a female grotesque, the very ‘poem body’ as a space in which ideas and images jostle in encounter creates a leaking openness which invites a reader to think experientially through questions of possibility and limit, instead of just responding in terms of existing social protocols. The poem is an uneasy space, rather than a neat, pre-packaged space of moral and aesthetic insight into some facile ‘human condition’. If “an element of the grotesque is present in every woman”, then female poets who have “Gurlisque tendencies” (like Harris and Kelly) seem to

be using the grotesque to subversive ends, deftly and even defiantly (Miles 1989: 147). As Minnis says in her poem “Preface 11”:

I like disapproval and so I am a poet. It is only seen in the worst dispositions...

I am a poet and so I should be able to say something true...

(2007: 6)

Camp: Versions and Subversions?

Another aesthetic mode to which a Gurlisque poetics is indebted is ‘camp’. Camp can be a difficult notion to grasp, with multiple inflections, but for Lara Glenum, in her thinking about an evolving Gurlisque poetics as practiced by women poets who have “Gurlisque tendencies”, Camp is a key concept. It is useful to refer to “Notes on ‘Camp’”, the famous 1964 essay by Susan Sontag in which she speculated about Camp as “a certain mode of aestheticism” (1964: 2). Sontag proposes that ‘Camp’ is a “sensitivity” whose “essence...is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (1964: 1), where everything is aware of being placed in quotation marks: ‘woman’, rather than woman. She later advocates that if ‘Camp’ is “one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon”, the “way of Camp” proceeds “not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization” (1964: 2). In short, Sontag is suggesting that ‘Camp’ entails a knowing, self-reflexive “love of the exaggerated, the ‘off’, of things-being-what-they-are-not” (1964: 3). This seems an apt lens through which to approach a Gurlisque poetics, with its interest forms of female performative. As already suggested, women may find themselves placed in the categorisation of the “off” because they (*we?*) are considered “social contaminants” (Glenum: 2009: 18), or even ‘things-out-of-place’, especially when they adopt forms of agency which are beyond the habituated limits, for women, of beauty and domesticity, of motherhood, privacy, reticence and duty, of a sexuality that reproduces preferred norms. (The tension, here, is that femaleness is also pre-marked as contradictory, so that transgressions of some sort may be permitted or encouraged – sexual desire, for example – but always at some risk of the agency turning against a woman, turning her ‘indecent’.)

Chafing against inherited norms – of normative femaleness, of lyric expressivity, of linguistic propriety - these poets have elected to see “everything in quotation marks” in respect of gender, whether as possibility or limitation. The idea is that gender is a constructed and mediated repertoire, shaped by naturalised boundaries which, once recognised as

invented, constitute a transgressive enticement to a Gurllesque imagination. A poetics of the Gurllesque sees such poets testing these boundaries with various combinations of hyper-exaggeration, humour, crassness, and extreme sentimentality, all of which, to borrow Sontag's phrasing, point to "Being-as-Playing-a-Role" (1964: 4). As I have already discussed, in "Sucking" – not a poem, but quasi-explanatory comments on her collection *The Cow* – Reines glaringly transgresses even the preferred distanced codes of critical commentary. She draws on diary conventions and pushes the confessional to its facetious limits, as if directly addressing the person who had asked her to write about how she came to write *The Cow*. She refuses any boundary between academic explication and personal effusion, discussing her depression on a particular day (in a slew of unrestrained detail): her mother has been jailed for a petty misunderstanding; she has been occasioned by her mother's being jailed for these thoughts led nowhere. They did not lead to any literature that I made.

For an experimental contemporary woman poet who finds herself wanting to examine the very intricate stereotypes and gendered roles of women in her culture, 'Camp' thus offers a useful tool. Also pertinent here is Sontag's reference to the ambivalence of feeling which camp arouses in her, a feeling simultaneously of attraction, and repulsion. As I see it, this is interesting in relation to the figurations of femaleness that appear in much Gurllesque poetry. For some readers, these will seem offensive; but they are also on the offensive, deliberately challenging. A provocative attention to female desire and expressions of sexuality, uneasily contained in the small space of the poem *and* pushing beyond the linguistic and conceptual constraints of the obvious, can seem at once outrageously shocking (throwing a reader into a state 'beside herself') but also, if a reader is ready to risk the admission of empathy, frankly liberating. This is no small achievement in a contemporary consumer culture in which women's bodies are the stock-in-trade of desirable goods, and sexuality can appear so commonplace as to seem banal.

Interestingly, in "Notes on 'Camp'" Sontag claims that the "Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticised – or at least apolitical" (1964: 2). This may be because of the arch playfulness of Camp, and its idiosyncratically individualised manifestations, both of which incline critics to consider 'Camp' a quirky, even self-indulgent tactic. Here, Glenum diverges from Sontag's notion of 'Camp'. Building on the question of a performative, Glenum explains that camp is:

the political posing as the apolitical, a tactic that aims to make the reader complicit in the poem's political subtexts by initially feigning that the poet's hyperbolic performance is nothing more than self-parody... all gender-inflected performance is essentially "camping" and these performances are never divested of political subtexts.

(2009: 14)

In other words, camp is not devoid of political impulse, but it manifests in unusual ways, not conventionally recognised as possessing political power yet capable of being mobilised for alternative, even disruptive, forms of aesthetic which in turn are associated with the possibilities of sociopolitical action. In this sense, camp might be a useful mode of agency for those whom society prefers to see in obedient, subordinate positions and yet who rebel against such biddable obedience. Here, as implied earlier, Glenum is acknowledging Judith Butler's notion of performativity as being central to 'Camp'. Glenum also uses the notion of camp to challenge the contention that women are allegedly by nature "given over to the false and artificial, given to make-up and costuming, to overvaluing useless trinkets, to deceit" (2009: 14). In terms of the Gurlesque, the worn stereotype of women as superficial, decorative, fickle, shaped by "artifice", re-appears campily and archly as important to female poets who are exploring what it means to write their gendered bodies into poetic form. An interest in artifice "is one of the hallmarks of Gurlesque poets who rail against classical canons of the Natural" (Glenum 2009: 14), working to subvert established assumptions of women's 'natural' deftness with pretence and the inconsequential. Here, too, we might remember Sontag's assertion that camp necessarily entails "a seriousness that fails" (1964: 7) "using the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate and the naïve". Gurlesque poetics takes cognizance of this curious 'failed seriousness' in its depictions of femaleness – but also inclines me as a reader to consider that perhaps the real 'failure of seriousness' lies in the difficulty experienced by the discomfiting range of intersecting discourses which shape contemporary femaleness – among them of gender, consumer culture, and feminism – to give full, vital acknowledgment to the perverse, distorted and politically *distorting* vitality of femaleness as both adopting and adapting gender performance strategies that escape simple consensus in terms of what various cultural camps deem 'proper'.

As illustration of a Gurlesque camp in action, let me explore a few poems by Chelsey Minnis. Her poems could be said to offer an intriguingly self-aware, camp feminism. The writing is playful and over-the-top, flagrant, but also has sharp sardonic teeth. As Glenum has observed (quoted in Krieger 2012:93), in poems such as those by Minnis, "there appeared almost no trace of the earnestness, sensitivity or self-seriousness that marked many such

poems stemming from Second Wave feminism. In the place of a high-minded or moral stance, these new poems had people bashing one another with candelabras...they had unicorns in them, and sequins, and swear words, and vomit” (Krieger 2012:93). The crass and controversial. The parodically mocking spoof. An over-the-top femininity. The consciously coy unsettling of norms by toying with girlishness beyond the prescribed limits of girlhood. This rampantly disconcerting assemblage clearly unsettles received ideas of the suitably poetic, as well as of the appropriately feminine, and of the ideologically feminist. This seems to push even further beyond the implied duality of Sontag’s observation that camp, “as a mode of seduction”, uses “flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation, gestures full of duplicity” (1964: 5). A Gurllesque camp, in inviting us to ‘read’ contemporary female embodiment and desire, oversteps the bounds of the dual, in an alluring performing of the entangled complexity of femaleness and gender roles as both/and, rather than either/or. For a Gurllesque poetics, the travesty is not the poetic theatricality of varied and discordant ‘femalenesses’ performed in the poems, but rather the limitations of competing social codes that seem reluctant or unable to accommodate the cacophonously diverse performativity of female possibility, and instead ward each other off in the outmoded camps of ‘Feminine’ vs ‘Feminist’.

A rampant mash up of jarring elements is evident in the poem “Tiger D”, where Minnis writes paradoxical statements one after another. Upon first reading, I might imagine that the speaker is confused, as there are so many stereotypes jostling for attention, written tightly up against themselves, refusing to cohere into an evidently meaningful whole. There are so many contrasting lines, and a curious tone of vacillating indecision. And yet, much of this, considered again, nevertheless carries with it the energy of assertive declarative and a refusal to obey prudent limits: “I am a tiger or a daughter or both”, the speaker announces, concluding – in so far as reasoned finality can be said to prevail in the poem! - “it is bad to be a daughter but worse to be a tiger”. In the second line, the speaker says quite blithely, “Of course, I am a tiger and a daughter”. The calm matter-of-factness of the claim and the voice work to naturalise the tiger/daughter association, holding easily together the qualities of exotic wildness and dutiful or ordinary daughterly relation; they are co-related, not incongruous at all. And then within a few beats, the line continues, rippling onwards and tipping a reader’s imagination towards a further complication: “but I am a show tiger...everyone demands/it because of my deep fur”. The motivational logic seems to be that tiger and daughter are also unfortunately correlated precisely *because* of their lush beauty, ‘female’ being to ‘animal’ not only wildness, but the almost inevitably burdened category of

sensual, beautiful, desirable, for spectacular show and performance, on demand. The whip cracks. Later in the poem, the speaker goes on to say “in addition I am a good show daughter/but only for show”. Again, we have this confounding method of substitution, which does not comfortably enable a reader’s mind to settle and fix meaning. We have to figure out the apparent contradiction: the daughter is not only an obedient show daughter, she is not to be touched – she, her very femaleness, is only for show to others. Her female embodied self is not hers. The daughter’s potential sexuality is contained by the structures that demand of her the proper daughterly role; her body at once evidently female and showing its femaleness but not acting on that femaleness for her own wildly ‘tigerish’ impulses which would see her stepping out of bounds. Grrrl. Grrrowwwling. Grrrowwing sexual. In writing such as this, a Gurlisque poet subverts lyric and confessional codes of sincerity, unsettling them with humour and an extravagantly layered or perhaps ricocheting poetic imagery which carries an assertive absurdity, inviting us to read femaleness beyond simple confessional truths that embody experience. There is a literary exhibitionism in the poems which nods at a version of Sylvia Plath as precursor – not the delicate Plath, but she of the IMAX authorship, brittle sensationalism, and the domestic grotesque. As Marsha Bryant notes, “if [Henri] Lefebvre and [Roland] Barthes theorised the poetics of everyday life, Plath brought the everyday into her domestic aesthetic to make poetry a form of cultural analysis” that purposefully warped the registers of advertising hype, advice columns, movie stardom, technological advances and etiquette handbooks (2011:148). Lara Glenum affirms that Plath’s influence for the Gurlisque derives from “her keen sense of poem as artifice” (2009: 13), as a cultural and conceptually performative space in which the artifice of language is linked to the artifice of femaleness, both as a culturally-received set of inhibiting constraints *and* as explosive imaginative-expressive possibility. In her PhD dissertation on the Gurlisque (comprising an essay on Gurlisque poetry and an original collection of poems called *Maximum Gaga*, Glenum offers an important remark:

it has never been clear to me that the poets we deem “confessional” actually conceive of their poetic practice as confession rather than the creation of a transitory, ephemeral self on the page. Sylvia Plath’s hyperperformative poems, for example, have a far greater investment in a political performance of the female grotesque than in charting or transmitting any biographical information. Despite the singular sharpness of her voice, Plath’s poems are interested in fictions that exceed and explode any concept of coherent self, ...deeply rooted in “self as performance,” the node out of which Gurlisque poets are operating.

(2009:3)

In a creative move evocative of Plath's poetic voice, Minnis's poems show "the Gurlesque's whimsical use" of a camp impulse to "grotesque...feminist ends" (Krieger 2012: 96).

Let me draw attention to several illustrative aspects of artifice and exaggeration in Minnis's poetic mediation of 'self', which indicate that confession has become 'con' fession, a more ludic performative presentation of shifting selves: "I don't like my servitude as a tiger...but I like baby bottles of cream", and "as a tiger I'm more drugged and more soft in the fur and therefore more valuable/to be blind" (2009: 117). While it is clear that these lines riff on femaleness as complicity and complexly imbricated desire, Minnis's poems often leave the reader confused as to her meaning, because of the repetitive use of this kind of hyper-stylisation. Perhaps this is the point. The Gurlesque seizes the power of camp to up-end niceties and norms:

To camp is a mode of seduction – one which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders. Equally and by extension, when the word becomes a noun, when a person or a thing is "a camp", a duplicity is involved.

(Sontag 1964: 5)

Thus, it seems that Minnis is employing some sense of 'Camp' in this poem in order to lure a reader into a space which teasingly confounds the limitations of inherited definitions. In the poem's last lines, the speaker says frankly "But if I am a tiger and a daughter then I better be good.../I better reform myself to receive practical instruction and not be a slut-o". Is the speaker conceding the inevitability of her gendered body? Is she ironising, opening up to the parodic possibilities of received conventions? As Jeffrey Sconce argues, a camp register is "highly ironic", even "infatuated with...artifice and excess", often in relation to obsolescent or outmoded forms which a camp style re-appropriates in neo modes (Sconce 1995: pp). As I see it, a Gurlesque poet such as Minnis could be thought to take up confessional and lyric poetic forms in this spirit, making them new. This may be achieved quite nonchalantly, rather than necessarily via the confrontational taste vectors associated with grrrl cultures; the poet's tactic may entail a casual counter-aesthetic and/or an "histrionic acting" out (Sconce 1995: 376), gaily cocking a snoot at sanctioned versions of female culture and its norms, especially hyper-saturated female consumer culture. The poems work as spaces that creatively draw on combinations of these norms to offer depictions of limits and constraints upon young women, and also of surprising female advantage. In addition, Minnis often leaves a poem with an

anti-climax, which leads me to suggest that the question of ‘camp’ as it informs a Gurlesque poetics trails many intriguing questions in its wake. (As criticism of the Gurlesque note, the specifically *queer* origination of camp, and its purposefully open-ended reconfiguration of normative categories, is also important to the development of Gurlesque poetics.)

Notwithstanding elements of outright critique as against more traditional confessional modes, however, an understanding of a Gurlesque poetics also asks me to admit that *subversion* is not a necessary impulse. Consider Marsha Bryant’s remarks about approaching the classroom study of contemporary poetry by American and British women poets:

the dominant key signatures of confession, critique and subversion proved indispensable for charting thematic links across the syllabus” *but* “they sometimes proved less successful when discussing individual poems with Gen-Xers and Millennials. In particular, my students kept resisting the idea that women poets always countered popular culture” via irony or parody or other forms of rejection.

(2011: 3)

As she discovered in discussions with her students, it is possible that such poets, Gurlesque writers among them, might not simply *resist* or *reject* the popular cultural discourses and imaginaries that feminism tends to have excoriated – women’s magazines, for instance – but instead *incorporates* them, or *reconfigures* them in playful and productive ways so as to comment on gender codes. Thus, “[r]ather than transgressing a dominant and patriarchal culture, these popular registers transgress our usual sense of [contemporary] women’s poetry as an oppositional aesthetic, [a] counter-discourse” (Bryant 2011:2). In terms of a Gurlesque poetics, then, a female poet’s approach may entail paradoxical modes of critique *and* celebratory appropriation. “Women poets may choose to do a little of both while tapping popular forms to invent, to mimic, to add depth and scope” (Bryant 2011:2). Given the assumption that pop culture is inevitably shallow and co-opted, this is a form of “counterintuitive innovation” (Bryant 2011:9), an “unexpected degree of media affinity”, a discursive re-contextualisation which involves “blurring boundaries between poetic language and media discourse in ways that do not limit themselves to irony and critique” (Bryant 2011:19).

We should acknowledge, here, Bryant’s explanation that her research into poetry focuses on *mainstream* contemporary women’s poetry, rather than poetry expressly designated innovative or linguistically inventive. She addresses work that is “syntactically accessible” (2011:9). However, I argue that her points can also be extrapolated to more

experimental writing by women, and that this is an important critical move *precisely* because it enables us to see that women's unusual poetry, which eludes neat traditional modes such as the confessional, is not inherently antithetical to social engagement. Poetry by a Gurlesque poet, for example, may show an interest in mediating the conventional divide between feminist critique and popular notions of 'the feminine', and it may do so by drawing on an inspirational combination of theoretical concept and mass-mediated images and ideas. If this makes for a degree of poetic difficulty, this is precisely the difficulty of contemporary female 'being', rather than some abstracted plane of remote conceptual-cerebral 'unintelligibility'.

In exploring the shapes of a Gurlesque poetics, then, we would do well to remember that it is too narrow to "impose an imperative for subversion" (Bryant 2011:81) which preemptively restricts a woman poet's material and method to 'approved', feminist-type emphases: outrage, authentic testimony to spheres of women's experience, critique of the patriarchy. Even such ostensibly compromised subjects as romance, sentiment, feeling, fashion, chick flicks...these might all be important to an innovative female poet who works in the ambit of a Gurlesque. They might influence her preferred 'girly/grrrly' subject matter, and the range of her formal innovation, in that she wildly borrows discourses and codes from many cultural genres with subaltern effect (see Bryant 2011). As Bryant makes clear, when reading examples of contemporary women's poetry with her students, she needed to develop an approach willing to bridge innovative understandings of feminist theory *and* cultural studies, allowing that female poets might function as complexly-positioned cultural insiders able to rework norms from within, rather than necessarily adopting a 'counter' or oppositional model of reactive subversion. I am arguing that this holds even with the often quite difficult, elusive poetry of female writers who are interested in conceptual-linguistic innovation and experimentation. Here, we cannot simply foreground questions of semiotic excess associated with a female-inspired avant-garde; rather, we might also consider that the supposed literary elite of a poetic cultural avant-garde intersects with popular, non-literary discourse, rather than necessarily being envisaged as *against* and oppositional. (As Marjorie Perloff notes, for example, in her research into broadly contemporary innovative poetry, many such poems bring together cerebral complexity with the ostensible detritus of consumer culture's found materials, recontextualising these culls in ways that create and release innovative meanings, challenging assumed boundaries between high and low and, by extension, I suggest, 'feminist' and 'feminine'.) In theorising a Gurlesque, it is helpful to adapt Jeffrey Sconce's remarks on the outrageous style codes of "trash cinema" (1995: 383): if camp "was an aesthetic of ironic colonization and cohabitation", newer cultural discourses

– among them the Gurlesque, I am arguing – could be said even further to rework this ironising. While the results vary, we seem to have forms of “an aesthetic of vocal confrontation” (1995: 374) and taboo, which rampantly borrows from the banal, the pornographic, the esoteric and the elite, a confounding appropriation and mash up that entails an “histrionic acting” out directed both against and in relation to sanctioned culture (Sconce 1995: 376). The Gurlesque is a poetry which thrills to “fantastic fabrications” redolent not only of the Surrealist category of ‘the marvellous’, but of what Sconce identifies as trash culture’s “badtruth”. This style “provides a defamiliarized view of the world by merging” – among other features – “the transcendently weird and the catastrophically awful” (Sconce 1995: 386). This is a Bakhtinian heteroglossia (1981) which, as Pollock might describe it, is “high, low, mobile, emotional, scenic, descriptive, implicated, inductive, desiring, strategic, mine, not-mine” (1999:24). It is marked by non-sequiturs, bizarre oddities, the hideous and the hostile, meta-discursive interruptions, incomprehensible junctures, farcical stylistic deviations, alluring allusions, parodic punctuations, blunt banalities and frustrating opacities. This is a resonant, politically unorthodox contemporary push of Dada towards an expressly female maximum Gaga that oversteps both the niceties of the feminine and of the overt politics of feminism, blurring, busking, basking...not *counter-cultural*, but drawing on consumer culture at the same time as it moves roughshod over feminism’s critique of popular and commodity culture as abject and degraded. A Gurlesque poetics, perhaps, could contribute to an understanding of the mobile, entangled politics of the intimate and the spectacular, the erotic and the quotidian, prompting the overcoming of entrenched polarities of thought which mistakenly continue to categorise femaleness into binarisms of compliance and resistance. In particular, the versions of camp that tend to appear in a Gurlesque poetics suggest that a Gurlesque needs to be located within responses to Third Wave feminist art and performance. Here, “instead of using the female grotesque to represent a discriminatory and wrongheaded view of women and their bodies (as the early feminist performance artists...arguably do), Third Wave feminists use it to reveal a liberating and joyous truth: that the beauty and excitement found in female bodies – as in all bodies – often resides precisely in their —flaws, [in...] their irregularities, excretions, permeability, and ephemerality” (Krieger 2012: 96).

If we borrow our perspective from the provocative extremes of an anthology of writing by “frenzied femmes”, the forms of femaleness explored by a Gurlesque poetics can be seen to encompass versions of so-called “‘femininity gone wrong’ – bitch, slut, nag, whore, cougar, dyke, or brazen hussy. Femme is the trappings of femininity gone awry, gone

to town, gone to the dogs” (Arsenal Pulp: np). The premise of this poetics is that “Femininity is a demand placed on female bodies” and that in supposedly deviant (even ‘queer’) “forms of femininity such as femme, there is the possibility” for an innovative poetics that risks exploring “the danger of a body read female or inappropriately feminine. We are not good girls – perhaps we are not girls at all” (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002: 13). The implication is that a Gurlesque poetics is writing that explores femininity as a cultural category of the mainstream which is nevertheless still often treated as minor, or marginal. In making poems from these marginalised femininities, a Gurlesque very assertively highlights ‘the feminine’ as *made* rather than natural. As the publisher’s site explains, “femininity to fit their own queer frames. Darlings, drag queens, whores, and action heroes...a femme by any other name is spectacular” (<http://www.arsenalpulp.com/bookinfo.php?index=160>). Here, I remind a reader of my comments on the history of burlesque theatre which has influenced Gurlesque; burlesque having proven a vital form of expressivity in gay cultures.

While the explicitly queer *sexual* orientation might not seem a good fit for a Gurlesque poetics as it originally appeared in the public eye, to my mind it is exactly the performative qualities of ‘the feminine’- and by extension of ‘femaleness’ and even of gender more widely, that this queer view highlights, offering an excellent intersection with a nascent Gurlesque which could work with ‘queer’ as a move against general norms. A Gurlesque poetics is amenable to such open-endedness, irreverently transforming categories, and even the ‘category’ of ‘girl’ into something stranger, more volatile, than has habitually been considered desirable. What is a ‘bad girl’ or a ‘good girl’ when ‘girl’ itself is held up to question? What is feminine, female, feminist, femme? Who determines the norms, and the transgressions? What is an appropriate ‘feminine’, and in what contexts – when, where - given that ‘girl’ is so subject to change? Reverent. Irreverent. Errant. Eerie. ‘Girl’ is this complex, and more, never consistently a version, aversion or subversion. Perhaps we should then allow the same variety for a Gurlesque poetics.

Girly Kitsch

Glenum calls the imagery of Minnis’s poems “lush” and “often kitschy” (2009: 15). She also uses the more specific expression “girly kitsch”. What might she mean? ‘Kitsch’ is a loanword from the German language and it translates roughly as ‘cheesy’ or ‘tacky’. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, kitsch means “Art, objects, or design considered to be in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an

ironic or knowing way”. Glenum explains that Theodor Adorno named kitsch as “the realm of artificial imagery” while other critics call it “a parasite feeding on the production of ‘true art’”. She goes on to note that kitsch may entail an aesthetic shift from “cosmos to cosmetics” (2009: 15), in other words, from the elevated, universality human transcendence of Art, to the supposed trivial superficiality of contemporary popular and consumer ‘art’ forms. For example: the painting “The Kiss” by Gustav Klimt may widely be considered high or ‘true’ art, while a duvet cover set which features a print of the same painting printed on it, sold at a Viennese souvenir shop, may tend to be seen as kitsch. The original painting is internationally known for its artistic value but to commodify it by turning it into a home décor or fashion item – a duvet cover, placemats, a T shirt – this category shift is often assumed to diminish the unique genius of the high art object, stripping it of its auratic power and relegating it to another, more trite, culturally substitutable zone: the banality of the kitsch. Kitsch is often associated with shallow materiality and commodification; treated as only a resemblance of ‘real’ art and, usually, it is a bad likeness, in bad taste.

What does this mean for an emergent Gurlesque poetics? From the start, it is necessary to change our optic, looking through a less conventional lens. While I will not detour into complex discussions of postmodernism, for instance, this theoretical premise has long debunked naïve assumptions about universalist artistic purity, acknowledging the powerful ways in which many forms of contemporary artistic practice refute mimetic realism, instead turning to a recombinant salvage aesthetic. This frees us to imagine the possibilities of a Gurlesque that works with cultural material in ways that shake established categories.

Let me look at the poetry of Patricia Lockwood, for example, which has been characterised as the work of an “Enfant terrible at play in the fields of pop culture, the literary canon and roadside attractions” (<http://www.oprah.com/book/motherland-fatherland-homelandsexuals#ixzz4mA0BUkNy>).

While she has not explicitly been labelled a Gurlesque poet, an observant commentator has noted the links, saying: “Lockwood is not the first American poet to combine feminism with shock value, and both with digital-era caricature (look for a 2010 anthology called “Gurlesque”), but she is the first to incorporate such a gift for storytelling, and to get it so right” (Burt 2014). If we place Lockwood in the aesthetic company of a Gurlesque poetics in-formation, we can see that hers is a grotesque cultural concatenation that has the capacity to rub cute the wrong way, in the process releasing its power, and discomforting impolite assumptions about the assumed seriousness of art and the supposed banality of the everyday. Take the poem “Revealing Nature Photographs”, which “is adroit in

its use of the list form and its execution of insinuation and wordplay” (Rooney 2014) so as to destabilise entrenched and polarised views of nature as female, a pretty, untouched, sentimentally ‘Natural’ space, distinct from the degraded embodiments of female sexuality as a commonly-traded cultural currency:

nature is into extreme age play, nature does wild inter-racial, nature she wants you to pee in her mouth, nature is dead and nature is sleeping and still nature is on all fours, a horse it fucks nature to death up in Oregon, nature is hot young amateur redheads, the foxes are all in their holes for the night, nature is hot old used up cougars, nature makes gaping fake-agony faces, nature is consensual dad-on-daughter, nature is completely obsessed with twins, nature doing specialty and doing niche, exotic females they line up to drip for you, nature getting paddled as hard as you can paddle her, oh a whitewater rapid with her ass in the air, high snowy tail on display just everywhere.

As Kathleen Rooney remarks, a poem such as this toys with a reader’s emotions: how should I respond? Laughter, indignation, shock, disbelief? Is this comic, is this horrifying? There’s an iconoclastic mockery which lets rip, but at the same time seems to come around and, rather disconcertingly, bite its own pained tail. “Imagining nature as a performer in pornography is funny,” finds Rooney, but as the deadpan pans around the increasingly evident *absence* of a consoling nature, the poem turns devastating (2014). The closing lines are written as if from the point of view of a bitterly disaffected male wreaking the revenge of sexual power over a girl who once spurned him: “Nature turned you down in high school. / Now you can come in her eye.” This kind of poetry is not naturally poetic. But nor is nature poetic, Rockwood insists and, by implication, nor are female poets constrained to demonstrate some natural poetic style, subject matter and idiom. Instead, they may choose a bawdy breaking down of boundaries that brings together surprisingly new things into a form that, while kitschly excessive, for some, becomes for the poet an experimental statement, variously blunt and tortured and whimsical, about ways of being in body and language. “With puns, cartoony satires and asides,” says Stephen Burt, “Lockwood skewers over and over the idea that sex is the key to happiness, or to the natural, or to the real” (2014).

Her poetry spotlights the weird in the ostensibly adorable; makes bedfellows of the horrifying and the hilarious. It finds in cuteness a cutting female grotesque, marked by deliberate deviance and perversity, a comic impulse that is seductively cruel, quick to betray. As Stephen Burt notes, “many of her characters are grotesques, cartoony, pixelated dreams”

and often “these characters are uncomfortably childlike, or hypersexualized, or both” (2014). Consider the poem “The Whole World Gets Together and Gangbangs a Deer”. The very precept for the poem is offensive, but also cunningly satirical with regard to who or what is conventionally considered to have subjectivity, forming “a pretty damning consideration of the tendency to conflate women and animals” (Rooney 2014):

...Every deer gets called Bambi
at least once in its life, every deer must answer to Bambi,
every deer hears don't kill Bambi, every deer hears don't
eat Bambi, every deer hears LOOK OH LOOK it's Bambi.
When the deer all die they will die of genericide, of one
baby name for the million of them. Then women begin
to be called Bambi, and the deer understand what women
are like: light-shafts of long blond hair and long legs

The cover of Lockwood's wild second collection – which features the head shot of a feyly feral satyr-cum-deer-girl (satire/come/dear girl?) – bills *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals* (2014) as a book that is “colloquial and incantatory”, “serious and funny at the same time, like a big grave with a clown lying in it”. The poems, we are told, “address the most urgent questions of our time, like: what if a deer did porn? Is America going down on Canada? What happens when Niagara Falls gets drunk at a wedding? Is it legal to marry a stuffed owl exhibit?” Evidently, the intention is to sweep past the pretensions and pontifications of proper cultural debate, and with girly verve to plunge riskily into the craziness of a contemporary culture, testing the possibilities of a female imagination that must work hard and headstrong, using all its repertoire of cute coyness, cynicism and cruelty, even to begin to meet face on the bizarreness of the real. The book features lines such as “the calm eye of the panty in the center/of the cartwheel” (a poem about cheerleaders) and “The gulf between a word and what it represents is still so great, but a shocking reflection of perfect tits floats and will always float there”. Written on the heels of Lockwood's provocative 1200-word “Rape Joke”, which went viral, and which forms the centrepiece of the present collection, the book is credited with renewing a popular cultural interest in poetry. It was selected as a ‘Best Book of the Year’ by publishing platforms as diverse as *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Powell's*, *The Strand*, *Barnes & Noble*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Pitchfork*, *BuzzFeed* and *Flavorwire*. (Her debut collection, *Balloon Pop Outlaw Black*, made the *New Yorker's* Best Books list for 2012, and was lauded by *Rolling Stone* magazine.) Lockwood's ‘cute’ has teeth, and is very willing to use them. Nibbling. Gnawing. Grating. Her “savage intelligence” (Robbins 2012) is subtle, its witty, off-kilter combination of

finesse, fierceness, and funny prove a disorientating combination, and strikes me as typical of a girly kitsch which works through a cute by taking on clever guises.

As has been said, “Lockwood’s work often turns on the moment when the familiar becomes unsettling. In her poems, reassuring objects – pettable animals, comics, pencils, blackboards, chalk – are endowed with unnerving qualities: Bambi becomes a stag (‘Now look at the fawn and grow an antler’); dismembered cheerleader parts rain down on a hornet-suited high school mascot; nipples are compared to ‘perfect pink erasers’; an adolescent boy stares at Magic Eye pictures waiting for them to yield up ‘their innocent parts’” (Smith 2017:20). This is a strategic slew that revels in a girly kitsch, playing (and plying) with the roles of femaleness in kitsch aesthetics, giving us poems that are variously profane and profound. Her poetic lines “are unceasing, relentless, uncontained” (Rooney 2014). In the final poem in the collection, “The Hypno-Domme Speaks and Speaks and Speaks,” Lockwood writes, “I was born as a woman, I talk you to death, / or else your ear off, / or else you to sleep”. Such lines alert us to the knowing wit at play in her engagement with the rambunctious energy of a girly kitsch, which threatens constantly to morph into something darker, less socially biddable.

Lockwood has visibility as a Twitter poet, which, as some have observed, does not endear her to those academic critics who work as the gatekeepers of the ‘poetic proper’. Aside from “Rape Joke”, probably her most widely-known poems thus far are her tweets, called ‘sexts’. These are “mini-poems, inspired by the Anthony Weiner scandal – that may be a new genre unto themselves. They are surreal and impossible come-ons that mock the over-sexualization of everything in modern life” (Wernick 2014). Consider these examples, from early 2012: “I am a water glass at the Inquisition. You are a dry pope mouth. You pucker; I wet you”. And: “I am a living male turtleneck. You are an art teacher in winter. You put your whole head through me”. And: “People in love as Looney Tunes: an endless antagonism which somehow does not kill them, then a slowly closing hole on their faces at the end”. Having a fine further go at the online universe as a paradoxical medium of self expression and self extinction, Lockwood also tweets cutesy selfies and sardonic slutty selfies, and “paparazzi shots” of her cats – “the love of my life”.

Smith refers to the “twinkling naughtiness” of Lockwood’s writing, which “can occasionally be hard work”. This very *work*, I suggest (adapting the comments from the context of Lockwood’s prose memoir *Priestdaddy* [2016] to her poetry), is part of the creative labour performed by a Gurlisque poetics. Some suggest that if “her poems miss, which they frequently do,” then “their ideas seem larval and merely cute” (Garner 2014: np),

but it is also possible to argue that it is “a mistake to take Lockwood’s cuteness at face value. The rites and symbols she holds up for ridicule...are not only ornamental” but part of the cultural panoply that “transform[s]” the mundane and familiar habits into “object[s] of collective veneration”, becoming “a way of exposing the irrationality of institutional authority” (Smith 2017:20). In other words, her cuteness, as a form of girly kitsch, performs an important cultural labour in refusing neat boundaries between serious and comic, political and personal, coy and critique. Lockwood says in an interview about the poems in her second collection: “Post-gender fuck poetry. Animal puberty. Countries going down on other countries. Pronouns assigned at random, marriages between all things. No one even wants poetry to sound like this, but now it does” (O’Neal 2014).

As illustration, at this point, let me not cite from a poem but rather re-present the Table of Contents to *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals*, simply re-situating poem titles (in their original order). As is clear, they constitute a bizarre poem which suggests the iconoclastic grrrl style and reach of Lockwood’s poetry:

Is your country a he or she in your mouth^{xv} -- Search ‘lizard vagina’ and you shall find -- The whole world gets together and gangbangs a deer -- He marries the stuffed-owl exhibit -- An animorph enters the doggie-dog world -- The Hatfields and McCoys -- The arch -- When the world was ten years old -- List of cross-dressing soldiers -- The hunt for a newborn Gary -- The fake tears of Shirley Temple -- A recent transformation tries to climb the stairs -- The feeling of needing a pen -- Nessie wants to watch herself doing it -- Bedbugs conspire to keep me from greatness -- Last of the late great gorilla-suit actors -- Factories are everywhere in poetry right now -- Revealing nature photographs -- See a furious waterfall without water -- Love poem like we used to write it -- Why haven't you written -- Rape joke -- The hornet mascot falls in love -- The descent of the dunk -- The third power -- Natural dialogue grows in the woods -- The brave little _____ goes to school -- There were no new colors for years -- Perfect little mouthfuls -- The father and mother of American tit-pics -- The hypno-domme speaks, and speaks and speaks.

(https://vufind.carli.illinois.edu/vf-oak/Record/oak_120735/TOC)

With all this imaginative and linguistic energy, it’s easy to believe the claim of an admiring reader that any one of her poems “devoured raw in the morning, will lend your whole day a fevered, uncanny sheen” (Cara 2017). In the wake of my discussion of Lockwood’s poetry as cute girly kitsch, it is useful to know that Glenum (2010) has ventured that Sianne Ngai’s concept of “cuteness” is a name applicable to the feminised kitsch that features in her theorising of a Gurlisque poetics. In a series of articles, and subsequently in a section of her book *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Ngai engages “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde”. She

creates a complex, nuanced discussion of ‘cuteness’ as a contemporary aesthetic category which is supposedly trivial, yet also not marginal, given its powerful positioning in the aesthetics of consumer culture. She explains the popular associations of ‘cute’: “smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy”, as well as “helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency” (2005: 816). Mediating these associations, Ngai suggests that “cuteness is a way of aestheticising powerlessness” (2011: np) because it is “fundamentally about minoriness” (2005: 816). If an object is ‘cute’, what kind of value is being ascribed to it? Positive? Negative? A complex, Schrodinger-like both/and? Ngai’s work poses similar questions. As she argues: “To call something cute, in vivid contrast to, say, beautiful, or disgusting, is to leave it ambiguous whether one even regards it positively or negatively. Yet who would deny that cuteness is an aesthetic, if not the dominant aesthetic of consumer society?” (2011: np).

An aesthetics of ‘cuteness’ is culturally connected to the “infantile, the feminine, and the unthreatening”, and these identities “get even cuter when perceived as injured or disabled” (2011: np). Ngai also suggests that ‘cuteness’ “bears the look of an object not only formed but all too easily de-formed under the pressure of the subject’s feeling or attitude towards it” (2005: 816). This harkens back to the concept of the grotesque, implying the uneasy instability of the category ‘female’ which, while so flexibly able to accommodate and absorb ‘all’ that a culture desires of it, it is also volatile, always about to bite the hand that leads it. All these comments suggest that behind the apparently charming label ‘cute’, there lies a violence being created and effected upon the object that is designated cute, and that cuteness, as in comics and cartoons, has a dark shadow side (Glenum 2009: 15-6). While I cannot dwell on this idea, also relevant here in terms of the capacity for ‘the cute’ to disrupt meaning is the notion of abjection, which Julia Kristeva develops in “The Powers of Horror”. Abjection threatens the breakdown of meaning that is occasioned by the loss of the distinction between self and other, supra and sub-ordinate. ‘Cute’ is a powerfully abject category precisely because it eludes simple categorization, being at once sentimental and somewhat sinister. It “disturbs identity, system, order”: it “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 1982: 4). Once again, we see the potential alignments of cuteness, girliness, and the Gurllesque.

Cuteness is a disturbingly ambiguous mode. The potential attraction of ‘cuteness’ for a girl – and by extension for a poetics of the Gurllesque – lies in the highly-charged, turbulent alignment of differentials: cruel ferocity along with sweet passivity. This turbulent conjuncture – which a Gurllesque poetics plies in outspoken acknowledgement of the

brashness and indeed cruelty of which girlness is capable, refuting The Culture's preference for the supposedly innocent, obliging, dutiful, even saccharine girlness - constantly portends the irruption of the displaced and the improper into the constraining norm: think of the large, seductive doe-eyes of the cartoon-girl figure, one hand is flipping her skirt – oops! - and the other, behind her back, conceals a knife. Indeed, such irruptions can be depicted in forms of sentimental language that need not even be surreptitious, as the culture at large prefers not to perceive the violence of a power that masquerades as girly. The allure of the cute, for girls, is that it reflects their own intuition of the cultural *deformity* of 'girlness' as a category. Cute is itself a shrewd de-formation that parodically plays back rather than merely affirming, even though it superficially reads as merely a projection of the status quo. The embracing of cuteness is thus agentive and enabling, for it “rejects the degree to which [girls]...have already found themselves stripped of significant social agency”. In a Gurlisque poetics, then, what we find in the poetry is that cuteness and the grotesque “come together and offer [the poets –and perhaps the readers? -] a way to feel, think and rage about the boundaries and vulnerabilities of girlhood” (Osterholm 2016:113).

In the imaginative practises of a Gurlisque poetics, we see young women poets entering into difficult literary-cultural conversations, reading and writing – *responding* – to assumptions about the relative values of female embodiment and supposedly slight, 'cute' female forms of affect, by re-considering inherited assumptions about that which is relegated to “the minor, the ordinary, and the helpless” (Porte 2012:np). 'Cute' is a much-disparaged aesthetic label. (In academic reviews, a close analogy is 'charming', an appellation habitually reserved for certain kinds of deft, emotionally-moving, writing by women.) Cultural commentators are quite embarrassed to admit that they are affected by the cute, perhaps because, as Rebecca Porte suggests, “powerlessness is always, on some level, embarrassing” (2012:np), coyly revealing the cunning sleights of hand through which soft hierarchies may demur their own exertion and retention of authority. Cuteness “resonates strongly with the sneering charges of sentimentality and weakness”, but Ngai makes clear that “it's hard to understand important cultural ideals like rationality and power without confronting their opposites, that the softness and fluidity of the cute are, on some level, incredibly menacing” (Porte 2012:np), and that supposed powerlessness can become a subtle, canny rhetorical-artistic strategy.

A Gurlisque poet from the original Gurlisque anthology who develops her poetry in terms of the ambiguous aesthetic of cuteness is Chelsey Minnis. The cover of her second collection, *Poemland*, draws on girly kitsch, being neon pink, and printed in a photographic

texture that resembles pink fur. The title, too, seems to perform the claim of a reality different to the empirical real, one in which poems are the constituents, the inhabitants, the imaginative infrastructure. (The very worldscape implied by the title is reminiscent of funfairs and pleasure domes, a ‘poem state’ or ‘state of the poem’ that is very different from an alienating American ‘homeland’ and its association of militarism, security, and the inhospitable, as well as diverging from naturalised assumptions about poetic niceties and obedient form-and-content constraints. This is a volume which takes pleasure, and takes it to surprising places, via an everyday female quotidian of consumer culture. This forms an apt opener to the work inside. In *Poemland*, there are various examples of what Glenum would deem “girly kitsch”.

I want to sit calmly with my bangs curled...
 But my pet monster has bitten my hand!
 Life makes me so sad.
 So sad I walk down the street etc.

(Minnis 2009:23-4)

For illustrative purposes, take the lines, “I want to sit very calmly with my bangs curled.../But my pet monster has bitten my hand!” (Minnis 2009: 23). It may be easy to see how a reader could overlook Minnis’s writing because it seems naïve, voiced as if by a girl child. However, when located in a Gurlisque poetics, Minnis’s poetry clearly exemplifies a Gurlisque tendency: she purposefully mimics the official cute culture so feted in contemporary media, with its predilection for wide-eyed girls and pretty little animals. In the process, however, the mainstream meaning is altered, for the cute bites back. Much can be interpreted from the extract above. In the first line, one could suggest that the speaker willingly participates in the good girl narrative of demurely attractive beauty. However, this commodification of self and body does not proceed as planned due to the pet monster biting the hand. The poem draws heightened attention to ostensibly innocuous words: bangs becomes a violent explosion, rather than a styled fringe, while pet monster brings together disparate elements and associations. It connotes sentimental girlish sweetness via the word “pet” yet jars with the domesticated ‘monster’. A reader might find herself incredulous: would a woman speak this way? The point, though, is that the female speaker affects the tone of girlish coyness, almost in hyper-saturated B-movie colours, thus shifting the meaning towards the satirical, and highlighting the paradox of female infantilism and a curiously sexy femme fatale threat or promise. The pet monster, to my mind, is vagina dentata, the mythological toothed vagina just waiting to devour The Mister, but in this case – perhaps in a

parodic counter-censuring of taboos against female masturbation? – the snatch has nipped the bad girl woman. This reading may be extreme, I concede. And yet it is precisely the absurd rage of interpretive possibilities towards which the alluring voice of the poem entices one. What also may connote absurdity and “girly kitsch” is the exclamation mark at the end of the second line. The sentence does not *need* the exclamatory marker in order to heighten emphasis; and such punctuation is not frequently used in serious poetry, or even serious writing more generally. The exclamation is a mark of childhood intensity, perhaps, when the dramas of self themselves can seem hysterically exaggerated. Writing for children might cue emphasis via exclamation marks, for example. Similarly, though, this punctuation mark features in mass-mediated popular discourse such as comic strips, cartoons and related genres once considered ‘low brow’.

In this sense, Minnis is working inter-generically to create a layered, palimpsest figure and voice of femaleness that gives vivid life to ‘girly kitsch’. The image is in effect all-the-more vital for its flashy, retro linguistic mimicking of influential visual art such as Roy Lichtenstein’s large-scale Pop Art cartoons of the 1960s, complete with arch speech bubbles and ‘Boom’, ‘Kapow’ exclamations. Clearly, Minnis is knowing in her method, aware that she is encoding femaleness as a spectacular performative, thus upsetting the very spectacularisation of female behavior and embodiment on which so much Western culture is premised. She is not in any one-directional sense ‘critiquing’; rather she ‘takes on’ by taking on, by quoting and recontextualising, by assuming, the very ‘compulsory’ behaviours and modes that have been preferred for women: lovably winsome, charmingly endearing, attractively appealing, self-effacingly engaging, aka ...*feminine*. In a comic sense, if the speaker has been bitten by her own pet monster, she also seems untouched by this (as in cartoons), having an indomitable resilience and liveliness that in effect makes *her* into the force of a haunting monster, refusing to be merely petted, and rendered docile. Thus, Minnis can be said even to make use of the ‘grammar’, the exaggerated, visually-inflected syntax, of the comic form, the poem almost a ‘speech bubble poetics’ in which complex ideas present ostensibly simply, and yet push beyond the frame. Perhaps it is accurate to say that, “Dramatizing the pseudo-illicit, indulging in sumptuous voyeurism and lavish kitsch, Gurlesque is less peep show than parody” (Fischer 2011: np).

Gurlesque: Tendentious Tendencies?

While a Gurlesque poetics clearly offers a useful literary-conceptual optic through which to re-frame awkward abutments of the feminine, the feminist, and the female, it is not a poetics which has gone unchallenged. In terms of ethnic affiliations or identifications, for example, why are there so few minority women poets represented in the original Greenberg and Glenum anthology, aside from a few Asian-American writers. Where are the African American, the Native American, the Latina gurlesquers – aside from one or two? Is it simply the case that such young women in the States are not writing in a Gurlesque mode? Is it that this mode, for all its poetic-cultural challenges to narrow and delimiting notions of ‘girlness’ and to lyric poetic conventions, remains, like so many strands of the experimental-cum-avant-garde, rather WASP-centric in its propensities, not to mention heteronormative and somewhat unaware of possible margins that its own experimental female affirmations ignore? I do not wish to insist on answers, though some tentative responses to the questions may emerge. Perhaps there is a need to remind ourselves, once again, that a Gurlesque, being only a tendency and not a series of check boxes against which a critic can tick yes/no, may take a variety of forms. This may mean that we need to look more closely, or *differently*, when seeking to identity Gurlesque features in the work of a woman poet who is situated somewhat differently in relation to the cultural dominant than the majority of young women writers whose work has been considered to comprise a Gurlesque. Perhaps even a Gurlesque can benefit from being considered aslant, askance, an approach which could suggest ways forward for this mode, rather than resting only on the already in evidence?

Of the eighteen poets published in the Greenberg and Glenum *Gurlesque* anthology, three poets are Asian-American, and their inclusion in the volume, specifically under the banner of ‘a Gurlesque’ could coax us to appreciate that they too are working in and on the Gurlesque in their own terms, and that these terms might have specific cultural inflections. All three Asian-American women who identify as Gurlesque come from immigrant families, for instance. Their families are not English first language speakers, and the versions of femaleness in which the poets have been inculcated is likely to be an uneasy hybrid, a ‘third space’ comprising allegiances and disaffections of ethnicity, language, gender, and consumer culture, among others.

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned Ailbhe Darcy’s article on Irish poet, Dorothy Molloy. Darcy’s ideas might be useful in helping me towards thinking about the possibility of “Gurlesque tendencies” in the writing of Asian-American and African American women poets. While Darcy evolves the concept of a Gurlesque poetics towards the contextual

specifics of an Irish situation, she could be said, as an Irish critic, to be working in a similar position to my own as a South African, outside the location of origin of a Gurlesque poetics, and also beyond its initial timeframe. Recall that Gurlesque tendencies were first remarked as a phenomenon which emerged in the early 2000s poetry scene of the United States. This means that there might be specific cultural influences to the movement itself. However, Greenberg and Glenum have suggested that the Gurlesque irrupts in other geographical contexts too, beyond the United States, especially given that, as Darcy notes, “they are careful to say that they are not documenting a school but indicating a phenomenon” (2014: 3) which might well find purchase elsewhere, were critics to look. If scholars envisage a “Gurlesque poem” as being one characterised by something of “a camped up performance of hyper-*femme* feminism, lush with verbal music and kitsch imagery, which combines the carnival atmosphere of early burlesque with a disturbingly violent sexuality” (Darcy 2014: 3), it might be possible to find forms of Gurlesque, as phenomenon, practice, and creative concept, that are more visibly and emphatically (sub)culturally specific than the apparently naturalised ‘global-cultural’ shape of early (North American) Gurlesque. As some critics of a Gurlesque have implied, precisely because it emerged in North America, the influential seat of powerful world-international consumer culture, could naturalise its poetics, blithely unaware of being founded on the supposed ‘invisibilities’ of whiteness, heteronormativity, and middle classness.

While it does not provide rebuttals to such criticisms, Darcy’s article certainly suggests that the Gurlesque can manifest as a more localised poetic energy in cultural-geographical contexts beyond the United States. She uses the work of Irish woman poet Dorothy Molloy to make her case, arguing that concepts such as ‘burlesque’ or ‘camp’ can be “exchanged for alternative sets of cultural referents” (2014: 3). I am not quite comfortable with the notion of simple ‘exchange’ – one thing being easily replaced by another - but if we understand Darcy to mean a ‘re-configuration’ of ‘the Gurlesque’ tendencies when they emerge in different cultural contexts, perhaps the exercise is valid. Darcy grants that Dorothy Molloy wrote her poetry in a different context to Chelsey Minnis, Ariana Reines and Patricia Lockwood, but that her poetry can nevertheless be usefully understood through forms of Gurlesque poetics. Darcy motivates that Molloy, an Irish Catholic, “portrays Catholicism as something fearful and controlling of women, productive of the attitudes of a culture. Yet her poems participate in that culture in a camp-up, adoring way”. She also contends that Molloy’s poetry, in what could be seen as a Gurlesque tendency, “flouts the conventional understanding of what is lyrical and what is ladylike” (2014: 4, 18). Darcy suggests that one

of Molloy's 'tools' in her resistance is the use of kitsch where, it seems, Molloy can be seen to "investigate her own voice speaking as a cultural production" and so to "she renders the lyric poem itself kitsch" (2014: 4). The iconic feminine in Catholic Ireland is the "innocent, helpless and chaste" Virgin Mary (Darcy 2014: 9). As an Irish woman engaging her own femaleness, Molloy plays with dominant codes of religious female propriety, highlighting the possibilities of a religious girly kitsch for lines of oblique flight from dutiful subservience towards an erratic excess that pushes boundaries:

Offstage, I gag when you come
On the stump of my tongue. You project
Not a sound through my lips til I action

My jaws, spit your codpiece back into
Your lap. Then the roaring begins.
Between us we bring the house down.

(Molloy 2004: np)

Glenum has suggested in her essay that "the Gurlisque's appropriation of the grotesque, like its appropriation of burlesque, camp, and kitsch, stands in outright defiance of classical aesthetics and masculocentric practices" (2009: 17). Glenum goes on to affirm that Western or classical aesthetics are often concerned with "catharsis" or the 'pure' (coming from the Greek, meaning "to purify") and as the "social contaminants", women may never achieve "catharsis", "pureness" or perfection. Here we have come to a central conceptual point, as disruptions of this unattainable perfection seem to be intrinsic to the larger Gurlisque poetic project. In defiance of normative aesthetics and in acknowledging their "social contaminant" status, women poets with "Gurlisque tendencies" often "deny catharsis because they deny the aesthetics of the pure" (2009: 18). (As my subsequent brief discussion later in this section of an Asian-American and an African American or 'black' Gurlisque as possibilities might suggest, different cultural reference points can become *productively* contaminant of received female norms which invisibilise their whiteness and their globalised Americanness as naturalised and de-raced.)

Darcy suggests that Molloy's poetry engages excess through its depictions of the allure of the "instant gratifications of consumer culture," and the push towards "material indulgence and emotional self-indulgence, and...gratuitous female sexual pleasure" (2014: 8). I am not sure I entirely agree. Such an opinion seems less interested in working through the contrariness of complex questions relating to female identity, than in rather puritanical

censure. If Molloy's poetry is characterised by an Irish Catholic version of Gurllesque, perhaps Darcy might tease out the conflicted depictions of femaleness in her work, as mediated by competing discourses of religion and consumer culture, piety and sexuality, with their *related* promises of spiritual and secular perfection and transformation of self into The Ideal, the flawless, "the iconic feminine" – that "women are punished for not living up to" (Darcy 2014: 9). It is true that Darcy *does* claim that Molloy plays with this societal excess/perfection dichotomy in her context of Catholic Ireland. Darcy seeks to make a case for Molloy's as a "Gurllesque voice [that] is possessed, hypnotized, compulsive" and even though other critics may find Molloy to be self-indulgent to a fault, lacking in "self-control" and allowing "herself to go too far", Darcy justifies "Molloy's excess" as "calculated". This calculated excess is an extrapolation of a Gurllesque tendency to deconstruct categories. Not only does a Gurllesque poetics tend to play with the excess/perfection dichotomy, it could be said also to blur the violence inherent in the dichotomy itself.

Pertinent here are aspects of Elizabeth Grosz's article "The Time of Violence: Deconstruction and Value". The blurring occasioned by a Gurllesque poetics embodies deconstruction as "not the denunciation of the violence of law, but rather, a mode of engagement with, a participant in, this violence" (Grosz 1998: 196). This Gurllesque deconstruction "exerts its own modes of judgement, its own cuts on its deconstructive objects, including the law, ethics, morality and is, in turn, subject to other deconstructive and iterative maneuvers" (Grosz 1998: 196). Note that Grosz's article is a complex discussion of Derrida; she offers a Derridean reading of violence that demonstrates the *necessity* of the deconstructive impulse, the undecidable and the excessive. Grosz is dealing with very intricate philosophical theories that I cannot unpack, here, but I find her ideas illuminating in helping me to understand forms of Gurllesque poetics as being prompted by a tendency towards surfeit and abundance which are not simply to be dismissed as profligate, but as legitimate stylistic-conceptual strategies for tackling the meanings that are socially ascribed to femaleness.

Darcy's article also addresses the English language as a limit and constraint, rather than necessarily a possibility. Darcy poses the question: "if the language we speak is deeply encoded with the ideology within which it has come into being, can we ever talk our way of its bind?" This is an important question that is engaged in various forms of Gurllesque, among them Asian-American female practitioners of a Gurllesque poetics. Gurllesque poets explore answers to the questions of language and embodiment in relation to femaleness, constantly slanting – and indeed proliferating – what one imagines 'the' answer should be. In this sense,

the very ambit of their constant questioning can be considered a form of experimental poetics, in that they are reluctant simply to settle into received notions of preferred female identity.

Granted, there are several ways in which a Gurlesque can be seen as problematic. After the *Gurlesque* anthology was in the hands of others, and generally well-received, it also attracted some criticism. Greenberg responded to this in an early 2014 piece where she addressed the limitations of the ‘theory’ in a critical essay called “Some (of My) Problems with the Gurlesque”. The book had been criticised for being:

too heterosexual, too biologically determined, too white, too middle-class, too suburban in its focus.^{xvi} I don’t disagree: the first edition of the book features poets who are most often (though not exclusively) writing from these points-of-view. And as a theory of Third Wave feminist poetics, that’s a problem, because part of the idea of Third Wave feminism is abandoning those ideologies and binaries for a more complex notion of gender, one which intersects more thoughtfully with queer, working-class, non-white and other identity politics.

(Greenberg 2014: np)

She goes on to emphasise, though, the *positive* opportunities of the fact that “the Gurlesque has a life that extends far beyond me” (Greenberg 2014: np). One of the largest outcries in the forum is the seeming absence of queerness in the anthologised poetry, and in both the Greenberg and the Glenum essays which accompany the volume. The editors respond by saying that they certainly see queerness as part any Gurlesque tendency, and explain that in the first edition of the Gurlesque anthology they were trying to “present the evidence of an aesthetic in progress” (2014: np). A fair point. Now, however, there seems to have emerged a clear pressure, even a necessity, to illuminate the original Gurlesque tendencies through a “wide[r] range of voices” (2014: np). As detractors aver, this would enable the more proportional representation and inclusion not merely of what was absent, but what was, they believe, more-or-less ignored by the editors: Gurlesque poetic manifestations that are “queer, working-class, non-white”^{xvii} (2014: np).

Despite the perceived shortcomings of a Gurlesque poetics, I share the view that “the Gurlesque need not be perfect to be an emancipatory project” (Greenberg: np). Critiques of how the Gurlesque was initially envisaged can only contribute to a moving forward of the

concept, and its amplified usefulness (or otherwise). In speaking about the Gurlesque in their present both Greenberg and Glenum acknowledge the need to expand the extent of their initial theory, which they are quite content to admit is constantly in process. Greenberg intends to research “the Gurlesque in the movies” and “the Gurlesque and sex positivity and queerness”, and she indicates that Glenum intends to “write more about the international Gurlesque and Gurlesque visual art, among other things” (2014: np). I hope that in this work they both imagine *a* gurlesque, rather than *the* Gurlesque, a heteroglossic imagining which acknowledges the value of discordant claims, giving rise to gurlesques, plural, in which lyric and language impulses blur, as do elite and ordinary forms of linguistic power and poetic form. It’s possible. In small ways. A loose Gurlesque frame might be used as a tool to situate and bolster forms of ‘experimentalism’ in the work of young poets of colour, for example, offering a form of affidamento, or creative community, for what might otherwise seem an outlier impulse, at odds with the still powerful norms of literary-cultural preferences for poetry that supposedly ‘directly’ expresses the tribulations and joys of the experiencing self. Further, forms of gurlesque experimentalism might, to borrow the idea of innovative female poet Emma Critchley, have agentic propensities: “Though I am skeptical about the explicit social/political power of poetry, I believe the thinking done by and through it...may have implicit and incremental social effects” (2015b). Such effects seem to have permeated the very thinking of the editors of the initial *Gurlesque* anthology. Glenum has even suggested that, through attempting to conceptualise a Gurlesque poetics, “I now see the performance of femininity to be just that”, an “intentional performance, rather than a culturally accepted mode of being” (2010: np). This means, as she goes on to explain, that: “Gurlesque is an inherently unstable term” (2010: np).

It is precisely such vibrant instability that gives the concept of a Gurlesque poetics an ongoing theoretical relevance. It is a lens of varying focal lengths through which to consider, write and think about the shapes that an innovative poetics might take for young women poets of various races, orientations, and other affiliations, who find themselves negotiating the highly mediated, commoditised claims of contemporary being and embodiment. A digital, expanded second edition of the Gurlesque anthology, *Electric Gurlesque*, edited by Greenberg, Glenum and Becca Klaver, is slated for publication by Saturnalia Books in 2017. In addition, *Crystal Visions*, a volume of Greenberg’s essays thinking through the Gurlesque as a theory of third wave feminist poetics is planned by Noemi Press as part of the Infidel Poetics series. Even without these volumes being in circulation yet, the original anthology has contributed to significant cultural debate, in which I include valuable observations about

the current limitations of the/a Gurlesque tendency, and the potential for an expanded sense of a Gurlesque inclination so as to find a better fit for the poetics of young female poets who write from various kinds of cultural margins, rather than from white, mainstream America^{xviii}. This expansion would include attention to the raced forms of a Gurlesque – engaging its reputed whiteness, and exploring the emergent ambit of a black Gurlesque, for example.

The next section of this chapter aims to continue the conversation around the Gurlesque in order to tentatively suggest that if one looks, “Gurlesque tendencies” may be discerned more frequently in Asian and African American women poets’ work. I will refer briefly to three poets; Jenny Zhang, Francine J. Harris and Donika Kelly. Of the poets published in the Greenberg and Glenum *Gurlesque* anthology, a few poets are Asian-American, and their inclusion in the volume, specifically under the banner of ‘a Gurlesque’ could coax us to appreciate that they are working in and on the Gurlesque in their own terms, and that these terms might have specific cultural inflections. All three Asian-American women who identify as Gurlesque come from immigrant families, for instance, and can usefully be considered to imagine their femaleness as uneasy, hybrid cultural constitutions, a ‘third space’ comprising allegiances and disaffections of ethnicity, language, gender, and consumer culture, among others. Their views might, then, offer something productive to debates about a Gurlesque as engaging femaleness as unsettled congregations of female, feminine and feminist.

For example, we see these women poets struggle with the issues of assimilating into American culture while being seen as ‘other’ and exploring the difficulties of retaining their cultural ties. These circumstances can be said to be on a different trajectory to what the Gurlesque claims to do. Their poetry may be likened more towards Language poetry or confessional poetic form. For marginalised women, this may be even more important as they face the scrutiny of not adhering to the normative standard of appropriately Western women, still characterised as ‘white’ or Caucasian in the United States. Can these Asian American woman poets too be found with “Gurlesque tendencies” like their ‘white’ American female counterparts? I would like to tentatively ask: how do these issues of language and culture play with Gurlesque notions? Unlike the American woman poets that I have discussed above, Asian American woman poets have and are working with different and unique sets of cultural codes and connections. These poets are not unlike Dorothy Molloy in responding to their own sets of cultural referents. The pattern of language plays a significant role here as the poems that these poets write are often seen depicting the trouble of adopting American English as the dominant language. What happens to their home language that is tied so tightly to their

cultural roots where they have been uprooted from? As I will discuss, they are not just American gurrlls but Asian American gurrlls. Asian American gurrlls have their own set stereotypes, their own ‘nature’ to subvert, play and shake up. I am merely asking the question: what would an Asian American Gurlesque look like?

Consider the American gurrll and the expectations she subverts. Now try to imagine an Asian American gurrll. What expectations is she trying to subvert? What are these stereotypes? I can think of no one better to exemplify these circumstances than Jenny Zhang. I will refer to her in brief as a suggested example of an Asian American gurrll and Gurlesque poet. Not only is she a poet, she also writes short stories and nonfiction pieces concentrated on her experiences as a young Asian American woman. She writes about being mistaken for ‘another Asian girl’ simply because they ‘look the same’ (all these ‘Asian girls’); she writes about dating a guy who observes that Asian girls are “easier to handle”; she writes about sitting silently at a dinner table of white women while one of them sounds off ignorantly about the dangers of communist China. (2015: np). There are two major stereotypes at play in these examples: Asian girls are homogeneous no matter their country of origin, and Asian girls are unvaryingly (invariably) submissive, invisible creatures. Zhang subverts the homogeneous appearance stereotype by recalling her mother coming home, embarrassed and crying over mistaking two co-workers as one person. In this account, her father remarks wryly, “you know these people all look the same”. Furthermore, she notes the normative configuration of Asian girls as biddable, silent and docile towards men. In many Asian countries, women indeed are seen to perform a kind of girlish cuteness until a much later age than in Western nations. It is not uncommon to see women in their thirties with bows in their hair or holding cartoonish baby animal phone cases. Hello Kitty and the wide-eyed, sweet-looking Manga/Anime female characters that populate Japanese cartoons are commonplace – though the smallest of these characters often have the biggest breasts. They are “kawaii”, the equivalent of cute in Japanese that is a dominant aesthetic for women. No doubt I am oversimplifying here, but ‘kawaii’ speaks to the complexity of men’s preferred versions of femaleness, as much as to women’s knowing sexual performance of an unsettlingly immature sexuality. Bringing this blurred, liminal category of girl-woman into the cultural landscapes of the United States – note that Zhang was born in Shanghai, and came to the US at aged five – occasions further unease, when the cliché of the outgoing and agentive ‘American girl’ meets the stereotype of the compliant, ductile ‘Asian girl’. They differ; and yet their commonality remains forms of ‘girlness’ and associated femininity, the very categories in which a Gurlesque poetics is interested. While the mass-cultural stereotypes formed in the

United States from imported Anime series such as *Sailor Moon* and *Pokemon*, among others, facilely reinforce the assumption that Asian women should be docile and easy to deal with, Zhang's poetry writes into the complex space opened up by the fact that being an Asian American girl qualifies her 'as American', in both senses of the word 'qualifies': she is, and she isn't. Her naturalised status grants her legal rights, and yet the ideological and sociopolitical climate – in which her Americanness is bracketed as different from the real deal, or hyphenated as something separate – means that she is never supposed to be, or feel, 'properly' and fully 'American'. And, at the same time, too, she is not either an Asian girl, for she has adopted many of the traits of her adopted country, and feels distant from the place and heritage of her birth, even as she remains inspired by this birthright repertoire, especially in respect of family figures and powerful female mythologies. For Jenny Zhang, it might be said that she confronts the implications of such categorical differences. For example, she assures her readers that stereotypes of Asian girls can be subverted into oddly perverse angles of cute and docile that connote Asian American gurrllness, a tendency which disrupts both sides of the cultural equation. "Zhang breaks the accursed expectation of Old World modesty that conspires to deny the Asian American subject full range and volume in the chattier arts of the New World" (Nguyen 2015: np):

and I knew I would want to want more
 and I knew I wanted to be buried with everyone
 with the dead stars that lead you home
 with the child I won't have
 because I need to have a perfect cunt
 and because we are good friends
 we now bond over our perfect cunts
 we now bond over our perfect tits
 we now bond over our perfect mutations
 we now bond over our perfect facials
 the sperm you drank from my perfect cunt
 knows boundaries but we are too perfect
 to adhere to someone else's idea of perfection

Excerpt from "Everyone's Girlfriend" (2012: 3)

The outspoken quality, which transgresses decorous propriety and obedient docility, is nevertheless also marked by a desperately searching quality in respect of female friendships and their associated female cultural codes. What is acceptable, what are the limits? What do

the speaker and the person she addresses find ‘acceptable’ in each other? Are they the same? Different? Does their iterative bodily bonding unite them, or divide? In other words, the poem is at its core unsettled, questioning forms of accepted female behavior in a space of new (“now”) cultural encounter premised on repetitive formations of crafted physical perfection. Later in the poem, the speaker says, “but we speak for everyone now/and all of Asia changes when I change/which is why the world you live in/ can no longer be stable” (2012: 3). It seems to be a moment of transfiguration, of deliberate, rather than accidental, ‘occidental-oriental re-orientation’, in which the wider social realities are not in control of the change they are experiencing; the reality of an Asian American in-between signifies shift in both directions, in both of which agency exceeds that of the preferred norms.

Nguyen observes (revelling in the puns that he draws from a Chinese/American cultural reference): “In her poetic debut, *Dear Jenny: We Are All Find* (Octopus, 2012), Zhang flashes her Fine China, honoring the friends and family who coax out the haggard virtues of her beautiful irritability while zapping the smiley viruses of shameless appropriation” (2015:np). This is in keeping with a grotesque, carnivalesque impulse, in which a radical feminism ventures in what Mary Daly has called “the wild realm of Hags and Crones” (1978:3). In these terms, so-called ragged ‘haggard’ “writing is by and for those women who are intractable, willful, wanton, unchaste” (1978: 15). Zhang’s grotesque applies as much to cultural frames, since it is within these that feminised gender is located and understood. As the culturally-transplanted speaker changes, in proximate relation to Americanness and Asianness, so too do distorted ideas of ‘Asia’ and of ‘America’ modify, also percolating into the wider culture, beyond the single individual. Woman’s preferred perfection across *both* these cultures seems to be an important cultural link in the femaleness which Zhang explores: the phrase “we now bond over our perfect...” repeatedly expresses and insistently affirms ties between one culture and another, which in terms of male-female relations constantly invokes the perfection of femaleness as a synergy of idealised body parts. And yet, the female-female alliance articulated in the poem also creates moments of disorientation, where separations are implied between male notions of female perfection and women’s own ideas of their extraordinary physical and metaphysical capacities, beyond any limits of normative ‘perfection’. She muses:

I end up writing about the body a lot...In another world, I'd be some vapid girly-girl who doesn't really give a second thought to my body except how to adorn it. Because I shuttled between worlds, and specifically because I immigrated to the United States when I was a young kid, there's been ways in which my body has become a site of

critique; a site of conflict; a site of spectacle; a site to gawk at; a site to mock and to discuss without my consent. I find it impossible to not talk about the body.

(<http://officemagazine.net/sour-girl-jenny-zhang>)

Zhang's poetry, like the prose writing in her short story collection *Sour Heart* (2017), "is Chinese and American and bodily and profane and female...all in the same line" (<http://htmlgiant.com/reviews/25-points-dear-jenny-we-are-all-find/>). This is part of her Gurlisque possibility, in that she refuses comforting separations amongst categories, preferring, instead, to bring the unexpected into shared, discomfiting spaces. The very language which Zhang uses ('cunt', 'twat...'), and the images she conjures, often crudely smacks up against mild-mannered, feminised cultural ideals. In this bluntly graphic embodied mode (which Nguyen refers to as a deftly poetic "martial farts"), poet "Jenny Zhang is the New Girl fed up with the Old World crap sheet. Eschewing the coyness that makes the big wigs cream their pants, this Chatty Cathay takes her chances befriending the *fierce* whores, sodomites, and other forbidden scribes". She "is a far cry from the model minority who genuflects at the picket fence of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E schoolhouse" and its intellectualised games; instead, "the striking figure of the punk *flâneuse* and scrappy burlesque queen", Zhang "courts the misfits past and present who recognize the difference between her vagina and her voice — and sasses the ones who don't" (Nguyen 2014: np <http://jacket2.org/reviews/poet-profile#1>).

This poet gives us the "semiotic problem of 'Asian-American'" in relation to female identities. She "gestur[es] with misappropriation...in so many poems" to the "inherent difficulty of language in relation to identity as American". How you speak – does this make you properly belong? To what extent are an 'Asian-American' woman's looks, in the American context, almost naturally an assumed marker of her unbelonging? Often, questions like this are "as blatant" as 'Americans' "asking 'what are you?' to your face" (<http://htmlgiant.com/reviews/25-points-dear-jenny-we-are-all-find/>). It is versions of such a Gurlisque questioning that Zhang turns to more pointed cultural account. In the poem "Everyone's Girlfriend", expectations about the ways in which females reproduce and femaleness is also reproduced are found in tension, for the bodily perfection of female being that is upheld by American, Asian and Asian-American cultures is held up by the poet as a complex image of death, childlessness and deferred desire. For the speaker, the never-to-be-realised children, missing forms of loving bond and 'we-ness', are rendered impossible because of the physical beauty and tightly embodied perfection which circulate so freely as

transnationally dominant female norms in commodity culture. That no easy resolution is reached, despite the poem's criticisms of codes of femininity, is conveyed in the last lines, where the speaker reflects, "and I am deserving/though it is true I cannot be the first one/to say so". Deserving of what – bounty, Americanised cultural plenty? Deserving of criticism? The poem-space leaves the meaning ambiguous. Similarly, in the order of things, the speaker at once recognizes her to remark her rights, and yet simultaneously acknowledges the limits of her authority, and the subservient position in which femaleness places her, and, further, in which her specifically Asian ethnic identity is subordinated to second string second citizenship in the American cultural hierarchy.

For Zhang, it can be said that her need is not just to reconfigure notions of the Asian American girl but to redefine this in relation to other Americans and also to readjust these important notions for her own benefit. Her tendencies could quite possibly point towards an Asian American gurrlyness and a Gurlisque poetics that broaches the challenges of cultural difference, assimilation, and distinction. (Her newly-released book, as it happens, is titled *Sour Heart* [2017], and in it she stories the challenges of bi-cultural urban girlhood.) In the words of blogger Marcus: Zhang's poetry collection *Dear Jenny We Are All Find* "has the zeitgeist. Big time...It's got whim and wit. It's got wisdom. It's got the pain of living on various borders. It's nomadic in music and nomadic in feelings. It is big mind. Big bridge" (<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/13518965-dear-jenny-we-are-all-find>)

Zhang's poetry implies the possibilities of a specifically Asian American inflection of the Gurlisque. She explores the "drama of selective acculturation: sorting through the involuntary culture of one's origin and the willful culture of choice"; with a wild political incorrectness, she "discards the odious assumptions of each" and in her femaleness, she grapples to find ways "to inhabit the best of both worlds" (Nguyen 2015:np). Moreover, as Jeff Nguyen sees, she has the powerful capacity to find articulations amongst different forms of marginal identity – raced, ethnicised, classed, gendered. Indeed, he considers that her poetic affinities are to be found in the joy with which she celebrates a gay lineage in the writing of poets such as Marcel Proust and Frank O'Hara. As he says, "Zhang suggests that the immigrant who's shy and awkward because of her difference has more to learn about social and sexual dignity from the unabashed freak who has come into his own virtues by inhabiting his difference in a particularly fierce way", such that "the Chinese ingenue and the flaming queen bridge the *strange* gap of their cultural differences via the urban link of Chingy, a black hip hop artist who takes his name from the Chinese" (2015:np).

And what, possibly, of the shapes of a black Gurllesque? What might a view through this focused lens offer to an understanding of Gurllesque tendencies? Again, while I pose the question without intending definitive answer, the very question may prompt some valuable thinking. In this part of the study, I have elected to comment on poems by two African American female poets, Francine J. Harris and Donika Kelly. They may live in the United States, but their cultural codes and connections diverge somewhat from those of Gurllesque poets such as Reines, Minnis and Coultas. Harris' and Kelly's "Gurllesque tendencies" may be different because of these "alternative sets of cultural referents" (Darcy 2014: 3). In this vein, the following section will address poetry from Harris's *play dead* and Kelly's debut collection, *Bestiary*. Both collections are recent (2016), and while I cannot say that they are completely Gurllesque enterprises, there are certainly some poems which stand out as indicative of "Gurllesque tendencies" and a female Gurllesque poetic phenomenon.

Before I deal with the poetry, I would like to consider whether the currently topical notion of a creative 'black girl magic' might be relevant to any black Gurllesque, segueing from popular music, for instance, into more intellectual poetic forms. Take the conceptual visual album, *Lemonade*, released by Beyoncé in 2016. Beyoncé had accumulated cultural capital as a feminist and/or womanist through her song "Flawless" in 2014, which creatively appropriated and re-contextualised parts of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx talk "We Should All Be Feminists". The talk itself garnered 4.1 million views on YouTube and Adichie has released the talk in slim book form as a kind of feminist manifesto. There is clearly power in putting black feminist ideologies in a female rap song with the subversive lyrics, "I took some time to live my life/don't think I'm just his little wife...This is my shit/bow down bitches". The lyrics and form cockily re-animate, through female expression, a sardonic Queenly power, even as *Lemonade* is marketed as "a conceptual project based on every woman's journey of self knowledge and healing", extrapolating the aura of the diva to ordinary womanhood. The short film that was released first on Beyoncé's TIDAL streaming service weaves images of Beyoncé herself, showing her reading parts of Warsan Shire's outspoken female poetry, through pieces of her songs. The visual project is an intriguing mix of vibrant and dull, socially-referential and personal, taking the viewer through the five stages of grief. The voices of singer, poet, and speaker merge in a heteroglossia; it is hard to tell where ideas originate, and the performance of femaleness is expressed by Beyoncé, but

simultaneously seems to summon, as a potent performance, a wider cultural affirmation for black female embodiment. In one particular section, she relays (after the title card ‘Anger’):

If it’s what you truly want, I can wear her skin over mine. Her hair over mine.
Her hands as gloves. Her teeth as confetti. Her scalp, a cap. Her sternum, my
bedazzled cane. We can pose for a photograph, all three of us. You and your
perfect girl.

Is what Beyoncé doing Gurllesque? She reclaims words like “bitch” and “pussy” for herself as the Riot Grrrls did. In “Don’t Hurt Yourself”, she sings “call me Malcolm X” and “I am the dragon breathing fire”. In “Formation”, she states, “I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making”. There are many other references to herself as dominant and unashamed of her sexual prowess. She taunts men; she is constantly playing with two sides of the same coin, love stricken wife and angry scorned woman. The visual album ends on a positive note, with ‘Acceptance’, but in this agency there is an exceptional female vitality, celebrating female power. This feature may not be completely Gurllesque, but *Lemonade* does seem, in its tendencies, to point towards the possibilities of a specifically black Gurllesque that is already emergent in the popular culture music scene, and which may be further evidenced in the genre of poetry. It’s true that not all cultural commentators are persuaded by *Lemonade*: bell hooks rejects Beyoncé’s “fantasy feminism”; she “finds the film violent, apolitical, and overly invested in showcasing beautiful African American female bodies” (Perrott *et al* 2016:1). However, some scholars argue that Beyoncé’s aggressive femaleness deliberately parodies the hypermasculinity of gangsta rap, subversively effecting a critical détournement of male cultural forms and gestures.

The 65-minute visual album is characterised by an experimental interstitial, liminal quality, in which borders become permeable, and categories blur. “Twelve video clips are linked by brief passages comprise [...] poetry, visual tableaux and sound collage”, interludes that “lean toward avant-garde aesthetics. One thing avant-garde aesthetics and music video share is the capacity to hold several vantage points in suspension. In *Lemonade* this capacity allows the work to embody opposites: love and hate, engagement and alienation, forgiveness and revenge” (Perrott *et al* 2016:1). In this both/and space – familiar to us as a feature of a Gurllesque poetics - the female figures are sometimes “very active bodies”, but these are at times set beside “still figures, sometimes ghostly, sometimes like dolls or mannequins, or posed as living photographs” (Perrott *et al* 2016:5). Similarly, the audio is marked by ambiguous “evocations of seeking to utter and straining to hear” ((Perrott *et al* 2016:2),

unsettling any facile, certain response, and inviting the audience to respond to the credible combination of fragile femininity and empowered feminism which Beyoncé offers as a black female response not only to black male betrayal, but also to racist histories of white oppression. The visual album is highly alert to gendered representations, and to race. Some sections hint at boys turning away from patriarchy. Some imply that the black girl has burnt down the master's house. In other sections, we see an albino girl, a transracial girl, a multiracial girl who perhaps passes for white, and in the sequence 'Freedom', characters who we have previously seen as white or black are painted darker, or lighter, and racial, cultural and gendered diversity is celebrated in couples embracing. And in yet another sequence, the image structure and audio emphasise "a matriarchal line of descent: young girls play in a Southern manor", accompanied by Beyoncé's voice-over: 'You look nothing like your mother. You look everything like your mother. How to wear your mother's lipstick'. This is followed by "a closing shot of a smiling, seated elderly woman" and "Beyoncé says, 'Your mother is a woman. And women like her cannot be contained'" (Perrott *et al* 2016: 2).

Trying to think through *Lemonade* as an instance of a black Gurl esque leads me into the territory of #BlackGirlMagic. According to Julee Wilson in "The Meaning of #BlackGirlMagic, and How You Can Get Some of It", this is a concept that was developed by CaShawn Thompson in 2013. Wilson puts in colloquial terms, saying that the term is "used to illustrate the universal awesomeness of women", with the hashtag being used to "celebrate the beauty, power and resilience of black women". Wilson's short article is linked to a YouTube video discussing the hashtag at length and while she generalizes by using "universal", I would like to localize #BlackGirlMagic to the United States for the purpose of this section. The hashtag not only started a collective presence on social media platforms but Thompson also started a T-Shirt campaign. This began a movement for Black American women to take pride in their blackness and show off their accolades, whether private or public, via Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and later, SnapChat. This agency entails the subversion of stereotypes customarily invoked about black women, and affirms resolve in the face of widespread mainstream cultural negativity against black female bodies. In 2017, the hashtag is still going strong. On Instagram, it has at least four million public posts. The movement has been supported by black female celebrities who use the hashtag themselves. One could even say that it can be seen in the album, *A Seat at the Table* by Solange Knowles (sister of Beyoncé). With songs aptly named, "Don't Touch My Hair", "F.U.B.U (For Us, By Us)" and "An Ode to Self-Care", Knowles' album reads as a complex musical interpretation of this hashtag. In "Don't Touch My Hair", she sings:

Don't touch my hair
 When it's the feelings I wear
 Don't touch my soul
 When it's the rhythm I know
 Don't touch my crown
 They say the vision I've found
 Don't touch what's there
 When it's the feelings I wear

(Knowles 2016: np)

Such lyrics advocate #BlackGirlMagic and to my mind intersect with the female energies which characterize a Gurlesque poetics. The #BlackGirlMagic has infiltrated the black female American music scene, in which women artists write, sing and perform the problematics of being a black and female in the United States, these ideas also percolating into countries like South Africa. I cannot definitively conclude about the relative absence or presence of a black Gurlesque, but hope that some of my comments in the present section attest to the possibilities of this poetics being found in spaces of cultural expression beyond the page. (Again, this should not be surprising, given the ways in which a Gurlesque poetics has drawn inspiration from female performance art, and the Riot Grrrl music scene.)

Keeping in mind the expressly black female energies of *Lemonade* and #BlackGirlMagic as possible intersectional elements of a black Gurlesque, let me move on to discuss examples of work by the black woman poet Donika Kelly. Kelly has created a rampantly-imaginative menagerie of experience in which poems fold back on each other, deconstructing fixed forms and expectations, 'the female' among them. The human bodies of men, women and children populate the poems en masse, in excess, spilling relentlessly onto the pages. The effect is forceful. Like Harris, Kelly implies that the speaker has learnt to be at home with stereotypical bodies and needs to unlearn while welcoming *her* varied bodies, rather than rejecting elements crucial to her being. As I see it, a Gurlesque tendency can be evident in Kelly's "Love Poem: Chimera" in terms of the speaker's ability, "at any moment, to morph into something completely otherwise", the female voice becoming a series of "powerful monster[s]" which undo the fixity of a single subject position and identity. As Greenberg says, this "is a Third Wave [feminist] move", a "method of escape", a fantastical "transmogrifying into strong, mythic creatures". The "girl refuses to stay in her category" and the poet relishes "a refusal to make these characters adhere to their scripted roles" (2013b:40). Kelly elevates her body to a mythical plane where it is part of different world; she subverts all beasts (despite the habitual social attribution of beastliness to her own black

woman's identity) and uses them in a beautiful femme grotesque to explore facets of her own black being. She enjoys the violence - the violent liberty - of deconstructing categorical bodies through poetry and language, inserting strange unheard words, inventing new beings. She revels in the excess of 'being', her poems posing questions without the need for singular answer. In ways we have already met in the initial Gurlesque anthology, this is a form of potent play which can be linked to the carnivalesque imperatives of a female grotesque:

Love Poem: Griffon

I am busy.
 Busy guard
 dog. Lion. What
 kind of bird am I?
 lazy, to sit here
 so long, in the act
 of guarding.
 Call me priceless,
 call me worthless,
 mishmash, I am.
 Hybrid, I am.

(Kelly 2016: 49)

Glenum has said that "The styling of female flesh entails the manufacture of monsters". And though 'monster', 'creature' and 'beast' have negative implications for black bodies, Kelly seems to be keenly aware and turns these historically-inherited monstrosities into a site of complex self-identification. (While I will not, at this far stage in the dissertation, develop new ideas, Cixous' conceptually promiscuous 'laugh of the Medusa' in her famous essay of the same name does spring to mind, and with it the reclaimed female powers of an *écriture féminine*.)

Bestiary, the title of Kelly's collection, refers to a "compendium of beasts" (both real and supernatural). For Kelly, her collection is a many-faceted catalogue of her own female "monster-making". Some of the poem titles refer to beasts such as "Mermaid", "Pegasus", "Werewolf", "centaur", "Satyr", "Griffon", "Minotaur", and also "Donika". There is also a poem titled "Love Poem: Chimera". As we can see, these titles all pertain to the larger meaning of the title of the collection. Kelly seems to be collecting beasts. All of the "Love Poem" titles entail beasts that are hybrids of two animals or an animal and a human. Some are more specifically associated with the 'female' – such as the mermaid – and others may

conventionally denote ‘male’, as in the satyr. Not only are the poems avidly “monster making” in respect of emphasizing a blurring of boundaries between human and animal, they are also creating male/female hybrids. This is a form of Gurlesque, I suggest, that pushes the notion of the term beyond even gender categories and attributes such as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’, and explores the possibilities of ways of being that are ‘other’. Such being welcomes animal becoming more than the original Gurlesque, and it also make explicit a Gurlesque’s connection to the queer performativity of a camp aesthetic and early burlesque, where gender was often displayed as liminally experienced rather than categorically fixed. Even more significantly, in the poem “Donika”, Kelly names herself as one of these strange, mythological beasts. This may be a further form of girly kitsch, beyond unicorns and furry creatures, in which classical mythologies are mined for their potentially enabling imaginative capacity, their ability to recast ‘femaleness’ as gender fluid rather than as part of a polarised binary of female/male. Similarly, this queering invokes the power of Blackness *as* beastly, owning and thus subverting the very diminished categories of normative discourse.

From the very first poem, Kelly creates a poetic space where her identity can be reconfigured via a bestiary which is made up of different animals. The speaker tells of “what burst from my back, from my bones, what lived/along the ridge from crown to crown, from mane/to forked tongue beneath the skin”. It is clear that the speaker wants to become a two-part hybrid creature and that what is dwelling “beneath the skin” is in need of being on the outside and at the surface. The short poem ends with a tone of triumph as the speaker advocates “What strong neck, what bright eye. What menagerie/are we. What we’ve made of ourselves” (2016: np). Kelly clearly asserts an identity that is plural and shifting. Her poem evinces a “Gurlesque tendency” in the attention it gives to embodiment, and it makes of the female body a flagrantly powerful other thing, “not closed, discrete system []” but “[un]finished, ever-morphing, unstable, and porous” (Glenum 2009: np). So too does Kelly morph in her colloquium of hybrid-beast selves, because she seems to be acknowledging that she is not singular and ‘pure’. She acknowledges herself as the very “social contaminant” with which ‘woman’ and ‘blackness’ have been labelled. Given the range of beastly forms and shape-shifting in the entire collection, black woman constantly reconfiguring as almost a form of black girl magic, Kelly insists that she is more even than hybrid, a term which is often scientifically associated with carefully controlled crossing, selection and breeding for desired traits. The bestiary she relishes means she is almost feral in her multiples, her body manifesting now this way, and now that. The morphing prompts the questions ‘What is she?’, and ‘Who are you?’ and the poems, the author’s strange poetics, slips from our grasp, eluding

answer. The bestiary takes age-old monstrosities, which have variously circulated as currency in high Classical Western culture, as well as in vernacular culture, and subsequently in popular cultural forms as well, and re-generates them as part of a transformative linguistic-conceptual poetic power. In this process, femaleness and blackness mutate into agentive emergence

Francine J. Harris, in turn, also draws attention to this “manufacture of monsters”, and in the process deconstructs debased notions of black femaleness *as* monstrous, revealing the category itself as made, rather than intrinsically meaningful. Her method is different from Kelly’s; instead of turning to mythical creatures she explores the excess associated with female bodies in general, and perhaps ‘chocolate’ coloured black female bodies more particularly. Consider her poem “canvas”. It begins:

You want to make a painting of a fat woman

As if you could render the skin translucent you start at the
stomach. Inside its bag, you start to fill in hot-cross pastries
and sausage and hot dogs on a stick.

You stand her upright.

You brush out a background in vats of all-purpose flour and
Swiss milk chocolate bars near the belly button and figure
you may dot areas of ambiguity with gummy bears and
popcorn chicken. But instead you find yourself stenciling in

pigs.

beheaded cocks.

(Harris 2016: 78)

This is only the beginning of a long, three page poem, a piece of writing that exudes so many figures of speech that a reader may feel overwhelmed, almost consumed by the rampant imaginative appetite of the poem itself. Harris takes on established artistic traditions of the female muse, the woman sitting as passive subject for the male painter. Fat woman: what comes to mind, what fills the mind’s eye? The overabundance of the images and actions implies that the female subject of the painting – “a fat woman” – is a body, indeed, for all her fleshy presence, an elusive ‘I’, that cannot possibly be contained by the artistic materials and

methods of the artist's attempt at painting, stenciling, or any means of aesthetic reproduction. She is always *more*. This excess can be considered an attractive, empowering comment on the larger allegory of the impossibility of ever fully 'making' or representing Woman as a figure, an impulse which has dominated the traditions of Western art history. And yet the surplus, the glut, is also disturbing, posing the corollary: where does 'it' – she? – stop? And where, by extension, is the appropriate limit of the shape of femaleness? While one may want no limit – for a Gurlisque poet, all and anything being possible – in the expansive 'fatness' of impossible female definition, this infinity is also challenging to imagine as a form of space and of being without boundary. A shadow question that the poem provokes, in me, is: who sets the boundaries, and for whom? And, further, is this liberating and/or restricting, depending?

To return to the use of the second person pronoun that pushes the poem forward. The speaker seems to be watching the process of the 'you' painting the woman. The speaker is focused on every detail, and there are too many details. From the start of this poem, the connotation of 'painting' is deconstructed and reconfigured as the 'you' sees fit. As soon as the reader may be able to visualise the image that the speaker is painting (in language), the speaker demonstrates even more distortion and confusion. The reader is given the image of a fat, upright woman with a stomach bulging with "hot-cross pastries", "sausage" and "hot dogs on a stick" with "vats of all-purpose flour" as background. Indeed, even the boundaries of woman and background seem to blur, figure and ground being porous, permeable. The text is maddeningly strange. Estranging. It reflects some aspects of what Glenum suggested in her essay on the Gurlisque: "The body, as the nexus of language and identity, is a strange borderland, the site of erratic and highly specific (and language-mediated) desires" (2009: 17). Harris represents this body of a woman as grotesquely on the verge of heightened possibility that is never certainly either benign or malign. Her body is imagined, probably on account of its girth, via foodstuffs, and eating. All seem to be possible of being consumed. In this, however, the "fat woman" also resists being easily consumed, visually and conceptually, in the poem. She is created by the poet as being 'too much' for a reader, purposely so, saturating the habituated images of female portraits as decoratively posed and attractive. (The contentious paintings of Lucian Freud come to mind.) I notice the profusion, the immoderate, messy mix of referents: ordinariness ("sausage", "hot dogs"); girlishly cute ("gummy bears"); luxury "Swiss...chocolate"); grossly stereotypical ("pigs") and then also a pornographically violent ("beheaded cocks") which even as the debased image flickers into mind, turns back again into the banality of beheaded male poultry and "popcorn chicken". For all of this, the

poet seems to imply, imagination must allow space when thinking ‘woman’, so expansive is her ambit. It could be possible to see these images as the ‘you’ conceiving of the woman’s identity. Thus, what is being pushed into and onto the body are all parts of her body’s identity. They can be seen as her “disjunctions in identity [that] are not to be worked through or resolved” like one sees in Confessional or lyrical poetry, these incoherencies are meant to be “savored and tapped for their cultural power” (Glenum 2009: 13). Given this, can Harris’s poem be Gurllesque?

To move forward, the ‘you’ in the poem has all the power to make this woman. Harris seems to be unconcerned with using a confessional or lyrical ‘I’ in “canvas”. Instead, the use of ‘you’ offers the reader a different platform from which to interpret the poem, where the speaker’s gender could be either/or.^{xix} The ‘you’ of the poem remains ambiguous. Is it a female artist? Male? Is it a projection of the poet, the notion of painting being an analogue for the conventional idea of poetry as created through vivid ‘word pictures’? What seems pertinent is the nature of what the ‘you’ (or the artist) is doing in representing the image of the woman. It seems an obscure “borderland” in which the “‘I’ does not confess a self, but rather [is] a raucously messy nest of conflicting desires and proclivities that can be costumed this way or that” (Glenum: np). As the ‘I’ is not used in the poem, it disconnects the experience of the poem from the expressive lyrical imperative and instead draws attention, at a meta level, to the process of artistic making which is not, clearly, simply poetic but an anti-poetic. The poem develops in a way that could be seen to be following the thoughts of the ‘you’ whom the speaker is describing. In this stream-of-consciousness development, we visualize the artist’s own process of making, through which “gummy bears” and “popcorn chicken” become “pigs” and “beheaded cocks”. The poem does not give us coherence, but “areas of ambiguity” in which girlishness and grotesque co-exist, supposedly pretty and supposedly repulsive share the same embodied space.

To borrow the words of Cati Porter: this poem illustrates the necessary incongruities of a Gurllesque poetics in its engagement with female embodiment: “there is so much darkness in the Gurllesque, a brutality, and a viciousness and a desire to reclaim our identity as females without sacrificing any of the power and momentum that the feminist movements have granted us” (2009: np). As the poem moves on, there is a moment to which the speaker and the ‘you’ return. The speaker observes, “you find yourself sketching in a butcher in sunglasses./He sits below her ribcage./He has cleaver in one hand,/in the other. a slaughterhouse” (Harris 2016: 78). The notion of the slaughterhouse recurs three times and I would like to propose that this slaughterhouse and the ‘making’ of the woman in the painting

are related. The slaughterhouse may figuratively be one locale in which a monstrously volatile concatenation of ideas about women, animals, appetites and disgust are mangled together. In a slaughterhouse, death and life are mixed; the death of one thing fuels the life of another, in the normalised processes of ‘meaning making’ that is the industrialised mass production turning animal bodies into meat which in turn turns into human bodies among which are female bodies, often rendered as earthy and animal. The image of the slaughterhouse is not uncommon among women poets with “Gurlesque tendencies”. In fact, the better part of Ariana Reines’s first collection, *The Cow*, invokes the slaughterhouse. It seems that in the ‘slaughterhouse’, the only place for women was to be being led in, chopped up and mass manufactured into sizeable chunks that come digestible for the rest of society to consume. However in Harris’ excessive, lush poetic expanse, is she not implying that digestibility, sizeable chunks and mass manufacture still cannot contain women from being *more*? The more the painter tries to paint, to contain her ‘nature’, the more the painter cannot keep up with the more his subject seems to endlessly produce. Harris is deliberate and aware of this female excess and creates an allegory in which to contextualize her own understanding of how women are trying to be contained. Does this make “canvas” a prime candidate for the Black Gurlesque? Maybe Harris’s poem sets up the context for this discussion. The slaughterhouse is a monstrous, terrifying metaphor, and yet also one that informs a significant yet obscured aspect of the everyday. This creates a sense of the porousness of boundaries between banality and the horrific. While it is difficult completely to understand Harris’s intention, the poem does strike me as a comment on the making and remaking of femaleness by a black female poet, a ‘processing’ variously externalised and internalised, with which we are already familiar from my previous discussions of Gurlesque tendencies.

The presence of a black Gurlesque is unclear. While #BlackGirlMagic may be a potential point of departure into this topic, there needs to be more debate and discussion surrounding the subversion of typical Black girl stereotypes through poetry, and I have not found a poet to exemplify a black Gurlesque to the same extent that Jenny Zhang’s writing can be considered illustrative of an Asian-American Gurlesque impulse. Harris and Kelly certainly provide me with examples of female grotesque in the work of innovative black American female poets, but..... black grrrls? blak gurrlls? be lack girls? black... *girls*? What to capitalise, and emphasise. Where to fill the gaps, and where to insist on the vital importance of such lacunae as attesting to continued cultural silencing of black female lives? It is clear that while I hope to discover and discuss forms of black Gurlesque, this phenomenon is elusive. In the lyrics and performances of both Solange and Beyonce, we see

glimpses of possibility. The same in respect of the experimental poetry of Harris, and Kelly. And yet the label that sits well upon the alternative poetics of a Gurlesque re-configuration of ‘girlness’ as applied to the hegemonic raced and dominant cultured girlhoods of white middle class femaleness sticks in the throat of black female embodiment. ‘Girl’ is so violently burdened with supremacist racial imaginaries, and the dangerously demeaning nomenclatures of slavery, and the abrogation of black *women’s* lives. Indeed, ‘girl’ sits ill even in respect of the continued patriarchy of much black cultural production, rap among this. As I grapple with the evanescent notion of a black Gurlesque (or, more accurately, varied forms of black Gurlesques?), what keeps slipping into the foreground are questions of *queerness* that complicate femaleness and girlness. Both Harris and Kelly are not simply black female poets, but black queer poets. Which brings me back to some of the revised thoughts that Lara Glenum has expressed concerning her initial thinking about a Gurlesque: “my sense is that the Gurlesque is about queering heterosexuality. My sense of this is intentionally provisional. I’m open to anything anyone else wants to say. But our discussion also raises the question of who gets to call queer. Who polices what/who gets called queer and what does not?” (2010:np).

The disruptive orientations of a queer Gurlesque interest group might make more explicit the debt of an original Gurlesque to the queer origins of camp, to drag, to female masculinities, to lesbian sexualities – the entire spectrum of LGBTQI identities. British poet Emily Critchley (also the editor of *Out of Everywhere 2: Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK*), writes of her commitment to a third-wave feminist poetics that “combines the ‘feminine’ and ‘vulnerable’ with the aggressive, the combative, and this is not all in defence, but sometimes explicitly offence – a deliberate querying of why female personae (or a female writer) should not display bad, even alienating behavior (a kind of Riot Grrrl poetics)” (2015b). She could be speaking of the Gurlesque. However, another element of her comment implies some of the *limits* of a Gurlesque poetics’ understanding of gender and sexuality: the poetry of which *she* speaks “objects to already-gendered subject positions as the poet finds them and everywhere tries to upset such narrowness” (2015b). In other words, on the innovative poetry scene, there might be a need for versions of a Gurlesque that trouble not only femaleness, but the very concept of gender as fixed. This form of a Gurlesque poetics might begin to imagine itself not only in relation to the constraints, agencies and pleasures of femaleness as a normative description, but gather disruptive agencies that destabilise gender and orientation as conventional norms.

Even beyond queer orientation per se, this expanded Gurlesque might also, while doubtless encountering some controversy over the supposed diluting of the term ‘queer’, give greater weight to the broadly queering energies of queer. As Sedgwick says of ‘queer’, it “is a continuing movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*...Keenly, it is relational and strange” (1993: xii). Here, blog comments from Charlie Glickman (2012) are helpful; they offer some useful ideas relating to queer and its use as a verb:

To queer something, whether it’s a text, a story, or an identity, is to take a look at its foundations and question them. We can explore its limits, its biases, and its boundaries. We can look for places where there’s elasticity or discover ways we can transform it into something new. To queer is to examine our assumptions and decide which of them we want to keep, change, discard, or play with. This becomes a practice in transcending the habit of settling for pre-defined categories and creating new ones.

In these terms, what might become possible is a queer Gurlesque that is but one part of a wider queering of Gurlesque tendencies. These comments might be the impulse we need so as to begin to make space – *spaces* - for Gurlesques or ‘gurlesqueries’ that expand beyond a North American locale to different local cultures, in which global consumer culture shapes and is shaped by the specificities of the ‘glocal’. What I am suggesting, I think, is being open to the possibility of a Gurlesque poetics appearing, albeit erratically, as an intersectional poetics, with different inflections. Perhaps in a spirit analogous to grrrl zines, such a gurlesque could offer scope for the poetic exploration of vernacular intersectional identities, their regulations, resistances and surprising reformations (see Harris 2003). A Gurlesque is not somehow inimical to such accommodations. As Glenum notes in a comment string where contributors volubly tackle the pros and cons of ‘the Gurlesque’: “Gurlesque is an inherently unstable term, and I have no interest in further stabilizing it or in defining who can and can be ‘in’ it. It’s not a movement. It’s a fraught nest of questions, even more than it’s a fraught nest of claims” (King 2010: np).

In discussing what seems to be occurring in Greenberg’s thinking is a layered overlapping, in which what e/merges is a “Gurlesque theory of *Third Wave feminist poetics*” (Greenberg 2013b:40, my italics). The emphasis, then, falls less insistently on ‘girlness’ than on expanding the platform to bring ‘gurlness’ into more explicit contact with, and differential contexts of, living as a black woman, or living as a queer person, for instance. In this regard, Greenberg finds queer black female poet Evie Shockley’s second collection *The New Black* inspirational. “[E]ven with many first person narratives”, the poetry “feels...ambitious”

(2013b:40). The implication is that Shockley is able to *turn* first person and lyric voicing towards innovative necessity, rather than leaving them sedimented in the intimately personalised suburbanity to which both conventional mainstream poetries *and* the abstract linguistic intellectualism of a Language-based avant-garde had them relegated. Shockley's volume is "a primer of innovative techniques", drawing freely on "traditional and procedural forms" so as to "hurricane through history from a gynocentric, African American position". *The New Black* is characterised neither by "middle-class whiteness" nor "girlness", remarks Greenberg, a fact connected to the poetry's political imperative of revisionist black female embodiment. As I have said, "the kind of subversive, femme-y posturing for which the Gurlesque is known" has seen a Gurlesque poetics critiqued for the comfortable whiteness of its practitioners (somewhat awkwardly, given the number of Asian American female writers who have found an affinity within its arc). A Gurlesque has been taken to task for emphasizing a "privileged suburban, feminine figure" (Greenberg 2013b:40). But perhaps such criticisms can be considered affirmations "of how difficult it still can be to write from that culturally degraded space of Girl, and how many other kinds of political power one might need to harness in order to pull this off" (2013b: 40). A way forward, for Gurlesque poetics, might be to seek out affinities with, and differences from, various Third Wave depictions of selfhood and embodiment among writers of widely female identification, so as to explore "how those representations are impacted by identity politics, aesthetics and other factors" (2013b: 40). Perhaps the impulse on which to build is one which attempts to locate a Gurlesque more carefully in relation to Third Wave feminist aims. This might enable us to see more clearly the weltered melange of tendencies in Gurlesque poetics: "shape-shifting, political, irreverent, postcolonial, sincere, slippery, scholarly, innovative, poppy, complicated and delicious all at once" (2013b: 41).

Chapter Four: In/conclusion

As I approach ‘the end’, let me move sideways a little, to cite illuminating comments from the experimental UK poet Sandeep Parmar, author of the poetry collection *Eidolon* (Shearsman, 2015), and a BBC New Generation Thinker for 2015. Parmar recalls that when she read at the *Times of India* Literature Festival in Mumbai, to an audience only of Indians (for her, a first), she decided to read “lyric poems about immigration and Punjab”. She was conscious of the oddity of this decision, given her known impatience with the prevailing poetic discourse in the UK as one “predicated on speaking from the center of the Empire and mimicking the same lyric niceties that have been in currency since the 18th Century” (Parmar 2016: 68). Parmar implies that she opted for a fairly ‘safe’ lyric voicing, rather than reading linguistically or conceptually experimental pieces, because she felt uncertain about the audience’s reaction to more obscure, challenging, innovative writing.

So she chose the more familiar poetic mode of lyric. And yet in choosing the familiar form of lyric, she experienced a discomfiting sense that she was compromising. She imagined she was pandering to received expectations that a diasporic writer of colour would naturally take up the historically white space of personal confessionalism, exoticising it via the filter of “post-colonial grief”. In choosing lyric, she then found herself believing that she had fallen into an expected role, one that troubled her. *And* to confound the situation further, she was then nonplussed that her audience was not disturbed by her choice of lyric! It is not that they were complacent, or indifferent to poetry; they simply accepted the poet’s right to write whatever kind of poetry she wished, and to read this at the festival. Through the entire experience, then, Parmar tells of how she “felt placed” in unsettling ways.

In terms of my own experience as a practising poet, I read this as a salutary and necessary *displacement*, a reminder to her about the potentialities of poetry, form, expression and identity, as much as the imagined categorical boundaries which she had come to believe defined the horizons for her as an innovative poet in a somewhat conventionalised cultural forum of a literary festival. In retrospect, perhaps the experience *does* connect to her longstanding refutation of the tendency, in UK poetry circles, always to want to fix a poet’s person and practice as one thing or another (2016:61). This freedom of thought and practice is something that she has struggled to imagine into being. The lesson, for me, is that fear of presenting as (and through) the experimental might be a mistaken inhibition. Similarly, as my dissertation has suggested, it is misguided to assume that innovation is something separate

from lyricism, even diametrically opposed to lyrical voicing. The same body of the same poet may contain these supposed disparities, their close encounters turning into multitudes. Parmar says she longs for the prevailing poetry scenes to “develop a mentally agile enough audience to allow poets to be unplaced” (Parmar 2016: 66). Given the anecdote of the Mumbai Festival recounted above, I imagine that this reaches beyond only the audience: Parmar, as poet, has grappled to acknowledge her poetry of the “unplaced”; struggled to develop the necessary agility to validate her own permission to create work that moves between lyric and innovative impulses, taking the risk of making poetry in spaces of the uncertain in-between. In this, working a poetics of liminality, she has needed to avoid the tendency for an aesthetics of “imitation and bland re-iteration”, across *both* “the avant-garde and the mainstream”, finding a willingness in her poetic thinking to reach beyond “a very nationalist discussion about poetry” that avoids internationalism (2016:68) and which, within such narrows, tends to avoid speaking of or dealing with things that in poetry are considered inappropriately “disjunctive, unassimilable” (Parmar 2016: 66).

It is not easy to position oneself as a poet who is interested in experimental impulses. As Vickery has noted of a North American poetry scene (already more extensive and varied than a South African poetry situation), innovative writing remains a contested category. A male-dominated mainstream poetry dismissed linguistically experimental poetry, for example, and a male-dominated Language poetry marginalised women writers of Language poetry. Further, women’s experimental Language poetry has historically been marginalised by feminists, and “is still undervalued in its feminist potential” (Vickery 2000: 12). Overall, too, critics have failed to understand the extent to which female writers of experimental, or innovative, or Language-inflected poetries *blurred* genre boundaries, the poetry they created making use of a generative mixture of linguistic-conceptual abstraction and formal-stylistic de-forming *as well as* recycling and reconfiguring more traditional modes of expressive voicing and situated personal embodiment.

If contemporary page poetry is already a marginal cultural form, then the situation for experimental writers is exacerbated: the poetry favoured by the small existing readership tends to “continue the romantic lyric tradition in which a single and singular voice struggles to express and defend an authentic ‘personality’ that stands over and against the inauthentic social world” (Naylor 1999: 7). Here, the first person pronoun ‘I’ generally forms the primary organising principle of the expression, narrating episodes of recollected or immediate experience in the enclosed, “autonomous world of words” (Naylor 1999:45). In comparison, Naylor consider experimental poetry an “investigative” poetics (9), which seeks to discover

the difficult relations amongst linguistic, historical, personal and political spheres, rather than turning inward towards self in search of coherence. Experimental writing invites a reader into a “propositional” world (1999: 45). In my own study, however, which has entailed the writing of the poetry collection *Thungachi* accompanied by a critically reflective attempt to think through aspects of my development as a poet-in-the-making, I think I have come to understand more complex relations between the ‘worlds’ offered in lyric poetry and experimental poetry. For a start – while this is not something I grapple with in detail, being unable to cover the varied histories of poetry in different social, historical and geographical situations – clearly, even these modes cannot easily be compacted into capitalised definitional categories of Lyric and Experimental; rather, each is characterised by multiples and sub-sets. What should be evident from my study, most importantly, is that for a female poet who is interested in developing a poetics that speaks to questions of female, feminine and feminist identities, lyric and experimental can find significant meeting ground, allowing an embodied ‘I’ to test its limits and horizons, as shaped in language and concept. In discussing the writing of my *affidamento* figures, and then considering various influences on the development of a Gurlisque poetics, it has been extremely enabling for me to have encountered the procedures via which women poets may be using forms of lyrical voicing, and forms of linguistic experimentalism into conversation. It is clearly not the case that a woman poet will necessarily opt *either* for the supposedly limited lyrical expression which characterises poetic discourses of the institutionalised mainstream, *or* for the more complex, unusual poetics that are shaping the margins of the academy and publishing. Many of the women poets which I have considered use precisely the fact of female embodiment, the female body, as the mediating factor between lyricism and language. In this sense, Naylor’s argument for innovative poetry as an investigative poetics cannot neatly exclude lyric voicing. For me as a female poet – as for writers such as Eileen Myles, or Evie Shockley, or Harriet Mullen, or Jenny Zhang, each woman writer with her own understanding of poetic purpose and procedure, despite shadowy ‘family resemblances’ as poets – it is the volatile, uncertain *space between* traditional lyric and experimental conceptualism that provides a disruptive impulse that shakes readers, coaxes them into the active reciprocity of what it means to read a poem. In this process, even lyric voicing is not ‘merely’ expressive of some transparent, pre-existing ‘self’, but is linked to the unsettling of assumptions about female selfing, a poetics that may play and politick, disrupt and assert, sometimes proposing self a confessional, but at other times tapping into contemporary self as an algorithm of new media, in which ‘I’ entails a queasy closeness and yet distance, inviting identification as well as critique. Overall, neat

correspondences are elusive. As in the poetry of Akilah Oliver, with its ‘flesh memory’: a reader may see that she “undermines the conventional division between formally-motivated poetics (often called “innovative” or “experimental”) and identity poetics as well as the aesthetic and philosophical assumptions upon which such divisions are based” (Smith 2010: 104). The result is a poetics of “giving oneself licence to explore those half-articulated states of subject identity where the subject is either dissolving or re-forming in a continuous state of flux”; this “is an important recognition of the way in which, at present, female subject identity is formulated” (Kidd 1993:159). For Keller, in *Thinking Poetry: Readings in Contemporary Women’s Exploratory Poetics*, this is a necessary “exploratory” poetics (2010:2). While she is writing from the context of the Bush administration, her remarks have extrapolated value: “ours is an astonishingly complex world, in which right and wrong are intricately interwoven, in which difficult problems require multifaceted, inventive solutions that may well involve material sacrifice and uncomfortable change...*exploratory poems* do not aspire to be comfortable or comforting, but, importantly, their opacities are not gratuitous” (Keller 2010:2). Indeed, in an international context of writing and reception, “many poets and scholars...point out that the familiar critical division between ‘experimental’ and ‘expressive’ poetry does not adequately reflect the poetry being produced now”. Yet these critical “categories powerfully persist in criticism and reception” and are “pernicious” in that they bolster a mistaken assumption that an expressive poetry, identified by the personal self, often evidently marked by gendered experience, and/or raced experience, is the *proper* form for an engaged feminism or for outspoken black femaleness. The implication, then, to offer one example, is that a female poet of colour who does not reference in her poetry a subject matter that clearly draws on her embodiment but prefers more obscure, language-based exploration, is somehow a sell-out, or a dilettante. Harryette Mullen is wonderfully dismissive of such silly prescriptions as “you can be black or innovative” (quoted in Spahr 2001: 12), but not both. She casts off such a limiting assumption as “aesthetic apartheid” (quoted in Smith 2010: 104).

2006 saw the publication of *open season*, the second poetry collection of South African multi-award-winning author, Sally Ann Murray. The poetry was considered by some to test the shape of the times, in its unusual mix of modes, voices, registers. In the work, poetics of lyric and a more-theoretically-inflected awareness of the linguistic and the aleatoric were

brought into pointed, often wry amalgam under the questioning ambit of ‘female identity’. Subsequently, the poet-academic published an essay reflecting on her praxis in *open season* in relation to women’s experimental poetics (2011). Drawing on the traditions of innovative female artistic-critical commentary developed in the US and Canada, Murray grappled towards the understanding that newness and innovation in local poetry would necessarily take a contested variety of forms, in which lyric impulses and conceptualism played off against differently emphatic valences.

In 2014, influential South African poet Kobus Moolman published “Keeping it new”, a quirky letter to himself, more ‘many festo’ than the founding statement associated with poetic ‘manifesto’, in which he urged:

South African poets need to begin to imagine alternatives to the conventional lyric. They need to imagine more hybrid forms, forms that are not afraid to reconfigure genre, that are prepared to take full account of the visual potential of the page, and that do not step back from a conscious poetic enactment of language and of meaning’s complex, even loose, referentiality.

(Moolman 2014: 38-9)

In this plea ‘to himself’ – as if emboldened by finding support in the pages of long-established local literary journal *New Contrast* – Moolman articulates a creative encouragement *consciously* to experiment with the possibilities of language as a less obviously referential medium than South African traditions of lyrical poetic self-expression or of social realist ‘word-as-action’ tend to have allowed. He is clear that this is not “about innovativeness or originality that is there to serve itself” (2014: 38); the point is “something much deeper”. He implies his desire for local poetry to move beyond established patterns of mimetic expressivism, and to welcome “alternatives”. Importantly, he is open-minded in respect of the “hybrid forms” that the bold “reconfigure[ing of] genre” might entail. He is not blinkered by facile either/or optics. As I read it, his essay is a provocation to poets to shake off inherited polarities such as page poetry and oral/performance poetry, or personal poetry and protest poetry, indeed ‘lyric’ and ‘language’ poetry and an inspirational call to break open these boundaries and move into a space of ‘experimental’ uncertainty that might enable local writing to find surprising energies. In my search for a way in which to write innovatively, and simultaneously in which to think about what it means to attempt such a poetics, the ideas of local writers such as Moolman and Murray have been useful prompts. At the same time, as my present dissertation indicates, I have sought to reach beyond the local,

looking to various elsewheres for potential communities of ideas and practice. As UK poet Parmar says, of poets who have inspired her writing: "All of these are people from whom I've learned a lot as I try to understand this stuff. Although they are just the beginnings of who I want there" (2016: 71).

To return, briefly, to a Gurlesque: this poetic tendency 'called' to me as a young woman of colour writing poetry in South Africa. A Gurlesque struck me as a fresh, youthfully experimental, emphatically female scene that enabled a poet to draw on forms of formal, cultural, and linguistic experimentalism *and* still to draw on a powerful post-lyric impulse that showed how expression and identity retained relevance in an innovative poetics. Despite some of the shortcomings of the Gurlesque as an 'inclination' for young female poets, it still seems *valuable* that Greenberg and Glenum produced their initial anthology, and that I, as a young South African Indian writer, happened on this cultural artefact and discovered in it a possible poetic affiliation. This link assisted me in understanding my own creative practice as one that, as with a Gurlesque poetics, at times "brashfully, playfully, provocatively, indulgently" moves away from the "earnestness, sensitivity, and self-seriousness that marked many ...poems stemming from Second Wave feminism" (Greenberg, editors' Introduction). Especially as it bears on my raced ethnicity ('Indian') as designated in the South African context, this feisty female agency was alluring. It suggested a possibility: even if part of my impulse as a poet was attached to the discourses of expressive identity politics which are still the most admired and critically praised topics for poetry in this country (these discourses supported my efforts as a writer to explore and articulate family histories and suppressed female voicing), nevertheless, perhaps – just maybe? – there was also a curiously in-between affiliation which I could develop, one which supported those elements of my poetics which longed to explore "the idea of self and identity and language as performance rather than essence", hoping to "break out of notions of proper behavior and language" (Wallace 2010). In a Gurlesque, then, I found a way of thinking and writing – of thinking about writing – that helped me to make difficult connections amongst lyric voicing, experimental-conceptual poetry, and the mediating of claims upon contemporary youthful femaleness. This active intellectual-creative imagining of affiliation also encouraged me to consider the extent to which forms of poetic experimentalism did not only involve unusual style, but carried the idea of poetry as a mode of *investigation*, as much as of strong personal feeling (see Kennedy and Kennedy 2013:23). I remain intrigued not only by the possibilities of a gurlesque aesthetic, but by what some have considered its limits. A queer gurlesque? A black gurlesque? What might these look like? Post PhD, I intend to pick up and explore such

question as they bear upon the work of young South African poets Genna Gardini, and Koleka Putuma. Both are poets published by uHlanga, and their collections are experimental and lyrical in variant ways. Gardini identifies as a queer writer; she has muscular dystrophy, rendering her a minority poet in a double sense, despite her position of relative racial privilege as a white woman. Yet, found in combination with her whiteness and her middle classness, questions of sexuality and dis/ability render her writing in *Matric Rage* (2016) subject to highly reflexive modes: political and playful, surreal and socially embodied, colloquial and driven by critique.

Gardini's poetry, for example, seems to me to be underwritten by the aesthetic mixing of feminism and femininity, of cuteness and disgust, of the grotesque cruel and the girly, that mark a Gurlesque impulse, and also push this towards a queer space where 'gurrll' is further decentered from normative discourse. Putuma, for her part, is a critically-acclaimed poet familiar to local audiences for her presence on the South African slam poetry scene, and as a theatre practitioner. She identifies as a Black and queer womxn, and her debut collection *Collective Amnesia* (2017) has been provocative in its voicing of a black femaleness which is at odds with community even as it seeks connection. In respect of both these writers' work, I remain especially intrigued by the tensions of the lyric-language inclination as a push-pull poetics through which young female poets of different intersectional orientations and races may mediate claims of femaleness, femininity, and feminism. I remember that Österholm observes, for example, that "gurlesque texts subvert gender in a way that sometimes can be called queer in the broadest sense of the word", beyond gender and orientation and subverting narrow norms more broadly (100).

I have found, in this study, that a Gurlesque, for example, may be considered experimental in that it sometimes shares, with Conceptual writing, a desire to annex, disaggregate, manipulate and re-mediate materials and ideas. Often, too, this occurs in provocative non-linear poetic forms that speak well to the disparate repertoires of contemporary femaleness. A Gurlesque may draw on personal experience, but it also thrives on fragments of found language, popular news' streams, daily idioms, and clichéd advertising copy, all of which are made new when recontextualised within the poetic economies of Gurlesque poetic tendencies. Unsurprisingly, too, I have found in a Gurlesque poetics nodes of intersection with Language writing, *despite* a Gurlesque insistence on the embodiedness of language, rather than as conceptual abstraction: both Language writing and a Gurlesque may find interest in the commodity, media capitalism, political economy and the formations

through which ideas, objects and concepts – such as ‘girl’ and ‘poetry’ – are put to work in dominant grammars and discourses of consumer culture.

In terms of ‘locating’ forms of Gurlesque in South African poetry, I note Greenberg’s reminder that many practitioners of Gurlesque poetics, rather like Third Wave feminism as a contemporary cultural movement, operate “largely in the ether – without a geographic or political center” (2013b: 39). This also needs to be factored in to further discussions about forms of Gurlesque that critics wish to tie to a poet’s specific national identity. The subject matter and even the style of a poem might carry some marker or trace of national affiliation, but it is equally possible, in an Internet age, that this collective identity is cut across by other, less public and less evident affiliations. To adapt Greenberg’s point: such poetics might then comprise “a collection of different possibilities and approaches, informed by a common history and current political climate but widely varied in its strategies”. This loose ‘Gurlesque tendency’, across national boundaries, might nevertheless be discernible in several ways. For instance, in the poets’ “clear desire to present the examined world through a gendered lens that understands ‘girl’, ‘woman’, and ‘female’ subject positions as unjustly Othered”. Extending this point, I would also remark that this lens is likely to be plural – or intersectional, and the concept of ‘gender’ multiple, and extremely fluid, situating femaleness even more restively than has already occurred in a Gurlesque poetics thus far. Further, this tendency might be evident in the poets’ interest in writing poems of and across gendered experience that share “fresh and contemporary engagements with language and form, a clear interest in innovation and experimentation, and a sense of the riskiness and permission imbued by what might be ‘avant-garde’” (Greenberg 2013b:39) in the twenty first century. Again, I suggest that this observation could more expressly articulate the understanding that ‘innovative’ form and language can take surprising shapes, shapes which sometimes borrow from and write through apparent conventional poetics such as the lyric.

As my own understanding of poetics and the practice of poetry has extended, I have come to use terms such as ‘lyric’ or ‘experimental’ not as defining categories which abruptly and arrogantly include and exclude, but rather as heuristics – routes towards finding out, and ongoing discovery. This seems appropriate. Asked for her definition of innovation, Harryette Mullen explains, “I would define innovation as explorative and interrogative, an open-ended investigation into the possibilities of language, the aesthetic and expressive, intellectual and *transformative* possibilities of language”^{xx} (quoted in Shockley 2011:10). This is a response that is descriptive not prescriptive, a response that revels in the plural.

Fellow African American experimental poet Evie Shockley concurs. She considers the innovative impulse not as somehow the opposite of lyricism, or unable to be reconciled with self-expressive identity, but rather as “a multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies” (2011:9). She sees these as strategies which all writers may use; which black writers may variously use, and which black women poets might well configure with particular difference of purpose, so as “to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing” (2011:9). She also reminds us that when used by black writers, these strategies might be ‘recognizably black’ – as for example in poetry indebted to “blues lyric”; or they “might not seem particularly concerned with issues of race” (Shockley 2011: 9). The point, clearly, is that in seeking a way between the attractions of lyrical voicing and linguistic-conceptual experiment, as a female poet of colour I have the right to claim expansive possibility, and to risk the limits of what some might not think possible, or appropriate, for a poet of my affiliations and cultural positioning. In other words, my particular racedness can variously appear and withdraw, in my poems. I do not need some ethnic permission to write formally experimental verse that has an historical prominence among a white American avant-garde, or to voice experiences that resonate with the middle class consumer-cultural repertoires of gurlqueries. And, in writing experimentally, nor need I feel awkwardness or shame, as a female writer who identifies with innovation, when my writing on occasion inclines towards lyric expressivity. Nothing need preclude another. The possibilities are inclusive, not stylistically exclusive. This has the exhortatory ring of a manifesto! Indeed, I might even recall that the formal experiment of an historical avant-garde such as Dada were moved by a political impulse, which those detractors who allege ‘mere’ style prefer to forget...

I have come to realise that a poet ought not find herself constrained by academically nominated categories. I began working in the tradition of a culturally-dominant lyric-confessional self-expressive mode. I found this mode useful for my own inclinations towards self situated in family, and family history. I did not initially know anything about ‘the lyric’, or about critics’ longstanding, even ossified investment in this culturally preferred mode. I encountered criticisms such as Middleton’s, scathing about the typically dominant poetry of the mid 2000s establishment in Britain and America, and which had percolated throughout the Anglo world: the poetry of “the expressive self” (1993:118), driven by the assumption “that a poem is a record of an ‘I’ speaking its loves and losses. This self expresses its feelings, narrates its history, and makes judgements, as if its right and ability to do so were beyond

question. It is a self untouched by postmodernism. Each poem is a tiny resistance to theory [...] and testifies to a general rule. Poetry is self-expression. Anything else is not poetry” (Middleton 1993:119). While I find the view rather stringent, it did help to draw my attention to ‘other’ forms of poetry than the lyrical voicing in which I had grown as a young poet, and to which I had grown accustomed: an innovative, but neglected tradition of experimental writing that was flourishing on the margins of the poetic mainstream. I also slowly began to consider that an ‘experimental’ might take surprising forms, at odds with those my eyes were becoming accustomed to looking for, after having studied so much internationally experimental writing. As Annel Pieterse has remarked, for example, in the context of poetic experimentalism, several disparate South African poets could be said to share a preoccupation with the materiality of language: Antjie Krog, for instance, as being textually experimental in respect of non-lexical material (2016:15), while other poets’ experiment not only with linguistic innovation but with a preoccupation of how ‘self’ is socially constituted in language and idea. She reminds us that both oral and page poets can deliberately deform language so as to interrupt received poetic ideas about the transparency of language as expressive of ‘self’ (Pieterse 2016: 29). She considers that poetry by Lesego Rampolokeng, for example, “performs the dilemma of the subject”; “performs the manner in which the subject is constituted in discourse, *and* a sense of self that seems in excess of, and bound or limited by the body. The apparently self-present lyric voice is doubled and split, speaking back to itself” (2016: 78). Such ideas will doubtless prove helpful when I move on to deepening the ambit of Gurlisque thinking, by working through the poetics which characterise the poetry of Putuma and Gardini.

In the years of producing the present study, I began to move from lyricism towards other kinds of poetry that eluded obvious labels but veered towards ‘the innovative’, ‘the experimental’, even while I still played with the shape-shift inventiveness of ‘I’. Somewhat to my surprise, I discovered that ‘the lyric’ need not be set against ‘other’ more experimental forms, prominent among them language writing, and conceptual poetry. In this, my experience gained clarity through reading Murray’s account of her own struggle, as a poet-critic, to theorise her practice. In other words, it became clear that lyric was not somehow – essentially, fundamentally, necessarily... – inimical to experimental impulses. It did not need to be a limit in itself, a narrow personal expressivism stultifying to innovation. If dominant modes of female writing in the early days of feminism demanded “the immediately accessible language of personal experience” which could carry the emphasis on the expression of personal-political ‘women’s’ content, and if the poem as expressive personal lyric was

considered “a place for self-expression, for giving a true account, for venting rage, and for embracing sexual love of women” (Fraser 2000:31-2), this did not mean, in the altered climate of more innovative experimentalism, that lyric had outlived its usefulness. I came to understand that while in the early days, Language poets and related linguistically experimental poets tended to dismiss personal voice - “the place of the author, of agency and identity” (Keller 2010:5) - as motivating premises for poetry, the scene has altered with time. Currently, there is a re-newed space for questions of the subject, rather than banishing ‘subjecthood’ from poetry as somehow old-fashioned, or unoriginal. To look at this from a slightly different angle: the narrow, conceptually abstract imperative towards the *evidently* linguistically experimental has shifted, being considered, especially by women poets, as an inapt model, “a closed model” which does not accommodate women poets and critics’ struggles with forms of identity politics as represented and expressed “in a range of works positioning themselves differently in relation to the masculine, white, and Western model of subjectivity that underlies the ‘transcendental ego’ cast off by avant-garde poetries” (Kinnahan 2005:12).

As my encounters with female poets referenced in this study indicate, women poets have been inclined to bridge supposed divisions of lyric and language, however they wished, and with great variety, in their poetic practices, so as to claim the validity of the “innovative necessity” which is adequate to an exploration of embodied femaleness. Thus, my early notion of ‘the experimental’ as automatically entailing linguistic and evident formal-technical-mechanical experiment was revised: even apparently familiar forms and modes – the lyric, confessional impulses – could be excitingly re-configured by female poets in order to address uneasily contingent ideas of female, feminist, and feminine. Just as in the case of lyric and language poetry, which might intersect, so too with these claims upon women’s identity. The result is not a comfortable space, to be sure, but it is more honestly representative of the ways in which I am culturally hailed, as a young woman poet of South African Indian extraction.

If some of my recent writing is more oblique, more obscure, than the early work which overtly explores questions of ‘Indian’ female identity, perhaps this is because I have hankered for a “poetry that is complex in the thinking it enacts and, correspondingly, in compositional strategies” (Keller 2010:1). I agree that this makes for some difficult writing – and reading. However, I suggest that this very complexity is a value, in that it turns simplistic assumptions about poetry towards *difficulty*, stripping supposed binaries of certainty: us/them, right/wrong, true/false, lyric/experimental. The poetry places a reader in a position

where thoughtfulness – thought fullness – is necessary, as a means through a linguistic-imaginative terrain that offers no direct ‘meanings’, never mind ‘answers’, and which relates obliquely to experience, but in doing so does not dump materiality and embodiment as superfluous dead weights. As I see it, this is important in a local context, where antagonistic oppositions still prevail, and where despite attempts at reconciliation, persistent differences demand – if we are not to fall into facile polarities – that we discover creative ways in which to accommodate, to live together.

In the course of writing this dissertation, and the related collection of poetry, it has been a challenge for me as an artistic practitioner and a nascent scholar of poetry to understand that there “are many reasons why poets deploy broken forms, leaps, disjunctions, irregular syntax, obfuscated meaning, improvisation, metonymy, and polymorphous subjectivities” (Heim 2015: np). Even more challenging has been to accept that, on the one hand, “an innovative surface does not make something politically, ethically, or even artistically radical”, and that, on the other hand, “identities can be claimed and deployed with similar shallowness”, meaning that this “complicated set of forces is in dynamic play”, generating “(necessarily temporary) answers” (Heim 2015: np). Thus, as with Maggie Nelson’s hopes for her research on poetry of the New York School, literary value and the economy through which it circulates and is given meaning: “this study has called out some names, and perhaps even conferred some value, without...losing sight of the complexities of such an endeavour, and... the vast possibilities that lie beyond it” (2007: 220).

Chapter Five: *Thungachi* - an original collection of poetry

Due to copyright constraints, the original poetry collection *Thungachi* can not be reproduced here for open access. The collection is available via: uhlangapress.co.za.

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ⁱ At the risk of oversimplification: the ‘Language’ school of experimental-conceptual poets began to achieve visibility in the United States in the late 1970s as a challenge to what they considered tired mainstream poetics. Practitioners favoured a retreat, in poetry making, from expressive self, narrative logics, aesthetics, and epiphanic closure in favour of poetics generated by verbal and numeric constraint, the aleatory (chance, luck...), discursive reconfiguration, and iterative procedure. They foregrounded the role of language as systemic medium rather than explanatory agent of individual ‘voicing’ or ‘representation’. The group is often identified via one of its prominent literary magazines, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, although the affiliations are extremely broad and differentiated. If Language writing is most often immediately associated with Charles Bernstein and Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian and Joan Retallack offer different, female inflections of Language poetics that will offer nodes of exploration for my own dissertation.

ⁱⁱ See Chapter Five for information.

ⁱⁱⁱ The phrase ‘put eyes’ means “To cast an ‘evil-eye’ upon someone, to cause illness by staring at someone, to spoil something by staring at t, to be envious” (Mesthrie 2010: 189).

^{iv} Chatsworth is a “large working-class suburb in south-west Durban, created in the 1960s under apartheid as an Indian group area, the largest such township until the establishment of Phoenix (q. v.) in north Durban” (Mesthrie 2010: 46).

^v According to Rajend Mesthrie, ‘house-name’ can be defined as “the first-name a person is known by in his home, especially where this differs from the name he is known by at school” (Mesthrie 2010: 101).

^{vi} It should be noted that the use of the Internet as a research tool has been unequalled by any other resource thus far. Through websites like the poetry foundation, poets.org and others, I have been able to read and research the poets who are presented in this chapter. Unable to find any of the collections in South Africa, this is the most important research tool. My country is limited and in acknowledging this fact, I have expanded my resources through useful websites as mentioned above.

^{vii} This might be true in respect of *poetry*. However, “the term originated in lesbian burlesque” (King 2010:np). See also Kerry Drysdale’s brief mention of the Sydney ‘Dyke Night’ scene which featured “Gurlesque, a monthly burlesque-themed event for women and trans-identified individuals that began in 2000” (2015:347).

^{viii} As Fischer reminds us, Glenum, in the Introduction to the *Gurlesque* anthology, gives an extensive (if inevitably not comprehensive) genealogy of the Gurlesque, “finding its wide-ranging roots in Berlin Dada, the historical avant-garde, ‘Gertrude Stein’s insistence on female pleasure, and Djuna Barnes’ baroque eroticism. Extra-poetic influences include V.C. Andrews, Anne Rice, Hello Kitty, the Guerrilla Girls, goth, punk, grunge, *Sassy* magazine, and the riot grrrls of the 1990s. Poetic influences include aspects of Marianne Moore, Sylvia Plath, Barbara Guest, and John Berryman, and an incipient female-centric tendency going back to Emily Dickinson, ‘the original Goth girl’” (2011:np).

^{ix} “Tiqqun is the blanket term for a mostly anonymous group of French writers whose work first appeared between 1999 and 2001 in a philosophy journal of the same name, and who subsequently split along more or less activist/artist line” (Young 2012/2013: 6).

^x Flarf poetry is characterised by a “quality of intentional or unintentional ‘flarfiness’”, meaning a “corrosive, cute, or cloying, awfulness. Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control. ‘Not okay’” (Sullivan 2011:np). ‘Flarf’ poetry often recontextualises pre-existing text/found materials from Google, leading to “hilarious monstrosities “complete with errors and incoherences. Flarf poems are often “created, revised, changed by others, incorporated, plagiarized, etc., in semi-public” fora such as list-servs and online communities of response. As an adjective, ‘flarf’ “is something akin to ‘campy’, but with somewhat different resonances”. Flarf is more “awkward, stumbling, ‘wrong’ than camp” (Sullivan 2011:np). In terms of Gurlesque poetry, the aesthetically rebellious nature of flarf could be considered appealing. Flarf intersects with a feisty Gurlesque recalcitrance, a refusal of pay obeisance to received poetic norms

and, in subverting such norms, making a mockery of restrictive sociocultural platitudes and the empty language – variously cloying and sinister – of instrumentalised, institutionalised consumer culture.

^{xi} As I will suggest later, this version of a transgressive Gurllesque poetics is not overly visible in the *Gurllesque* anthology. Critics have taken issue with the heterosexist orientations of many of the writers, and the poems, observing that the editors of the anthology lose the opportunity to demonstrate the debt which the Gurllesque owes to a poetics of queer performativity. More on this subsequently....

^{xii} Butler's work is extensive, and difficult. Her ideas are mobile, and tricky to pin down. I am indebted to Nieragden's very helpful article "Half the Heart Knows Itself" (2002) for aiding me in coming to terms with gender as a linguistic-physical performative in the context of a discussion of contemporary poetry by women.

^{xiii} Here, with little regard for the context of the original, but allowing intersections with women's innovative poetries, I re-contextualise for my own purpose remarks made by Lynn Keller on the linguistic and compositional experimentalism of the poetry of Myung Mi Kim (2008: 340).

^{xiv} Kim is one of three Asian-American poets featured in Glenum and Greenberg's *Gurllesque* anthology. The other fifteen poets are white American women.

^{xv} See Carol Rumens' "Poem of the Week" in *The Guardian* for sparkling commentary on this poem: "A political poem that contests the damaging gendering of nations is also, in the hands of a 'weird Twitter' star, a deliciously transgressive romp" (2017).

^{xvi} Wallace phrases this slightly differently, reminding us of the challenges that have been thrown at the poems included in the *Gurllesque* anthology: "are they too white, too straight, too suburban, too American, too physically abled?" (2010).

^{xvii} "non-white": I note with discomfort the persistence of definition by negation, and would hope that a more expanded Gurllesque might, in future, find less binary nomenclature.

^{xviii} My description, here, is somewhat loose: for example, Patricia Lockwood is a white American female poet, and when her poetry initially appeared, to much praise, some commentators nevertheless bemoaned the fact of yet another trendy white New Yorker writing urban femaleness. In fact, though, she is at the margins of the mainstream, living and writing in the American Midwest, and not being a graduate of any MFA programme, and indeed not having a university degree.

^{xix} Such second person address has been used with great effect by Claudia Rankine in *Citizen: an American Lyric* her subversive book-length poetic re-enactment of contemporary black American embodiment. The pronoun works variously to create intimacy, and distance. It includes black readers in its relentless recourse to racist incidents, and it reminds white readers that *they* are not you; they are *they*. They are excluded from this collective you by virtue (vice?) of their being part of the normative status quo

^{xx} Remarks made as a panellist on the topic, "The Role of Innovation in Contemporary Writing" at the 2000 colloquium "Expanding the Repertoire: Continuity and Change in African-American Writing".